



LUND UNIVERSITY

# Food Choices

*Negotiating identities and feeling at home in the social  
landscape of sharing a meal*

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## Abstract

Food choices: Negotiating identities and feeling at home in the social landscape of sharing a meal

Tess Waltenburg

This study highlights the sociocultural aspects of food consumption to analyse how identity, relationships and meaning is created in relation to food and meals. By using qualitative methods, a cultural analytical approach and theoretical perspectives by Sara Ahmed and Pierre Bourdieu, the aim is to create a deeper understanding of the sociocultural aspects of food, how it is consumed and how social surroundings can influence dietary choices. This study finds that social contexts and capital can influence dietary choices and eating habits both in specific situations, such as social events and eating with others, and have a long-term impact on food consumption choices and diets. It indicates how food consumption habits can be re-negotiated and changed over time through social situations and with new capital.

Keywords: food; cultural analysis; capital; phenomenology; sustainability; ethnology

## Abstract (Svenska)

Food choices: Negotiating identities and feeling at home in the social landscape of sharing a meal

Tess Waltenburg

Denna studie belyser de sociokulturella aspekterna av matkonsumtion för att studera hur identitet, relationer och mening skapas i förhållande till mat och måltider. Genom att använda kvalitativa metoder, ett kulturanalytiskt angreppssätt och teoretiska perspektiv av Sara Ahmed och Pierre Bourdieu är målet att skapa en djupare förståelse för matens sociokulturella aspekter, hur den konsumeras och hur sociala omgivningar och relationer kan påverka kostval. Denna studie visar att sociala sammanhang och kapital kan påverka kostval och matvanor både i specifika situationer, såsom vid sociala händelser och måltider som delas med andra, och ha en långsiktig inverkan på livsmedelskonsumtionsval och dieter. Den indikerar hur livsmedelskonsumtionsvanor kan omförhandlas och förändras över tid genom sociala situationer och med nytt kapital.

Keywords: mat; kulturanalys; kapital; fenomenologi; hållbarhet; etnologi

## Preface

Since I started this master's programme, I have been to three funerals and, strangely, it has provided me with new perspectives on food — how food is something that we remember loved ones by; something that is strongly connected to who we are, even after we pass; how things like peanuts, hot sauce, gummi bear candy and tequila can unleash so much grief, but also love and gratitude for the moments we spent with a person; the memories and relationships; coming together; remembering each other even when we are apart; that it is such a big part of who we are and where we belong.

The last memorial service I went to was for my father, who passed away as this thesis was written. I want to dedicate this work to him, because he is one of the main reasons why I highly value food, new experiences and sharing a meal. It will never be the same for me to eat Mexican food, a New York style pizza slice, have a double espresso or drink tequila, but as I cry when I sprinkle my food with hot sauce, I realise that I would not want it any other way.

Food is so much more than just food — sometimes it takes extraordinary events, like losing someone close to us, to remind us of that.

Lund, 2021-06-10

Tess Waltenburg

## Table of contents

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>II</b>
<b>Abstract (Svenska)</b>	<b>III</b>
<b>Preface</b>	<b>IV</b>
<b>Table of contents</b>	<b>V</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Background	1
1.1.1 Food and sustainability	1
1.1.2 Defining culture	2
1.1.3 Changes in food consumption over time	3
1.2 Aim and research questions	4
1.3 Disposition	5
<b>2 Previous research</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1 Culture, identity and community	6
2.2 Gender roles	7
2.3 Food as a social and artistic practice	8
<b>3 Material and methodology</b>	<b>10</b>
3.1 Phenomenology and ethnography	10
3.2 Interviews	12
3.3 Ethical considerations	14
3.4 Reflexivity	15
3.5 Material	18
<b>4 Theoretical framework</b>	<b>19</b>
4.1 Sara Ahmed	19
4.2 Pierre Bourdieu	21
<b>5 Analysis</b>	<b>23</b>
5.1 What makes a meal?	23
5.2 Food as a tool of orientation	25
5.3 Negotiating the when, what and how of a meal	28
5.4 The impact of capital on eating habits	34
5.5 Becoming orientated in the landscape of food consumption	38
<b>6 Discussion and applicability</b>	<b>42</b>
6.1 Public health	43
6.2 Sustainability	45
6.3 Marketing	45
<b>7 Conclusions</b>	<b>47</b>
7.1 Main findings	47
7.2 Concluding reflections	48
7.3 Indications of further research needs	48
<b>8 References</b>	<b>50</b>
8.1 Literature	50
8.2 Field work	52
8.3 Digital resources	52

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

What makes a meal? Is it the ingredients or the nutrients; how it is grown or who we share it with; or is it perhaps a combination of all these factors that makes food what it is? Food is something we are all in contact with. It is inevitable for us to have a relationship with it, but that relationship can be different depending on who we are, how we were raised and our social and geographical context. Since food is something that we all consume on an everyday basis, it is closely connected to our cultural identity and relates to issues in society both locally and globally. The food we eat has an impact on the world around us as it is grown, shipped, cooked and consumed. It connects us to other parts of the world through influences in food cultures that are constantly developing and transforming, to different places where the food is grown and to the people who have been involved in that process (Crowther 2013). The consumption of food, dietary habits and meals are closely linked to power structures and privileges, both economically and culturally. There is a relation between the materiality of food, such as raw materials, cooked meals, cookbooks and export products, and how it is an example of processes, such as movements in social and geographical spaces, production of similarity and difference, division and community (Salomonsson 2001:27).

Food choices are cultural matters that helps us build identities, connect with others, form relationships, create and maintain social constructions, and find out who we are and where we belong. This background is an introduction to the field and the questions that form the basis of this research. The objective is not to address every aspect of food, culture and history, as that would be next to impossible. It is, however, intended to place this research in a context and to highlight different themes and dilemmas related to the field and this thesis.

### *1.1.1 Food and sustainability*

As a complex phenomenon that is connected to a variety of issues in society, food is often a debated topic when it comes to sustainability. In 2016, the United Nations declared 18 June as Sustainable Gastronomy Day (United Nations 2019) and the European Union states that: "Food is essential to life. It also forms an important part of our cultural identity and plays an important role in the economy." (European Commission 2019). The Food and Agriculture Organization argues that: "The need to shift to more sustainable diets and food systems is increasingly evident but certainly not simple to achieve." (Food and Agriculture Organization 2019), which highlights the complexity of food consumption and its relation to

challenges in society. Several previous studies have contributed to the understanding of connections between food and sustainability by, for example, analysing the carbon footprint of different types of food (Röös 2012, Poore & Nemecek 2019). However, a meal is composed by so much more than its ingredients and nutrients. It is shaped by traditions, norms and power relations, and therefore there is a need to understand why consumers make the choices they make and what sociocultural meaning those choices can have, if we are aiming to achieve sustainable food consumption.

As Mine Sylow argues, food plays a significant role in our interaction with the world around us, and by researching it as a social and cultural phenomenon, we can explore other issues in relation to it (2008:13). Addressing the way food plays a role in maintaining divides and exclusion is also a potential way to address social sustainability. This is also elaborated by Gillian Crowther, who discusses how everyday rituals of food consumption and sharing a meal has a huge impact on the creation and maintenance of social groups, obligations and loyalties. These are so intertwined that we may neglect the role food plays in people's close relationships (2013:152). By studying food consumption, meals and eating habits, we have an opportunity to make sense of the social landscape of food, the potential consequences of different food choices and how it contributes to sociocultural norms and structures.

While food consumption is a complex area where various aspects are intertwined and may be difficult to separate, many of these areas have a sociocultural connection. Cultural analysis can therefore provide valuable insights and tools that can be applied to different areas of food consumption, which will be further elaborated on in the following chapters.

### *1.1.2 Defining culture*

Before proceeding with this thesis and delving deeper into food culture and cultural analysis, there is a need to define the understanding of culture that creates a foundation for this research. This will also be discussed further in the following chapters. As a thesis written within the area of cultural analysis, this study is based on an ethnological and anthropological view of culture as something that is not fixed or set to a certain geographical location. Culture here is seen as something that we continuously do, rather than something that is constant. It is not viewed as something that is only in operation in certain contexts, at certain times or during certain events, but as an ongoing process of creating meaning. It highlights everyday practices and situations, and the sociocultural symbolic meanings attributed to them (Sunderland & Denny 2007:47-49). Even something as simple and mundane as food can

carry endless layers of cultural meaning, and it is with that understanding that we delve deeper into this work.

But how has our view on food, its origins and our ideas of what a good meal is changed over time? As mentioned before, the intention is not to give a full historical background of food culture, but to address it as an ever-changing phenomenon. Providing examples from history is, in this case, primarily a way to highlight how cultural processes change over time and that there is no single answer to what good food is and how we should eat. Drawing attention to an understanding of culture as something that is practiced and repeated in the events of everyday life rather than a fixed system (Ehn & Löfgren 2012:13), and highlighting that food culture, eating practices, symbols and meanings change over time is one way to explore eating habits as a social and cultural phenomenon.

### *1.1.3 Changes in food consumption over time*

Westman and Tunón argues that there has been a change in our view of nature and its inhabitants during history. The economic system of the farmer society in Sweden, for example, functioned through self-sufficiency and a versatility of chores. The local landscape and its biodiversity were the resources at hand and it required knowledge to use them in the most efficient way. Through industrialisation and urbanisation, this kind of knowledge of the local environment lost significance for a majority of the Swedish population. The process between raw material and finished product became more advanced and the distance between people and nature, and the use of it, increased (Westman & Tunón 2009:11).

Sören Jansson points out that there has been a change in the balance between the influences of "circumstances" versus "personality" when it comes to food consumption. In Sweden during the 1930s, there was more room for individual choices than there had been before. What determined consumers options became less a matter of external circumstances and more dependent on personal positions (Jansson 1993:17-20). This is still reflected in the sociocultural landscape of food consumption today. There has been a shift as we have gone from being dependent on our circumstances to becoming individual consumers with several options to choose from. This understanding is important when addressing modern food consumption, as there is a wide range of choices for each individual consumer to make that all relate to meaning, identity, ethics and social belonging.

Even though we are all presented with different options, the level of empowerment to make informed choices vary between different consumers. In "Consumer empowerment in Europe: its determinants and the challenges met in measuring it" (Nardo et al. 2013), it is



estimated that materially underprivileged consumers are about 14% less empowered than more economically privileged consumers. The study also indicates that only 44% of European consumers feel conscious, informed and secure (Nardo et al. 2013:268-272). Hence, there seems to be a discrepancy between the expectations placed on consumers and how they are able to meet those expectations. This also indicates that there is a need to not view the influences of circumstances versus personality mentioned by Jansson as polarities, but something that can vary between individuals and groups, over time and depending on a variation of circumstances. As we view culture as a process that is not fixed, but something that is always done by people, something that is happening, something that is constantly being produced and reproduced, we can aim to understand how different consumers are influenced by circumstances or personality at different levels.

As Gillian Crowther argues, the meal and its social context is a scene that is constantly reproduced all over the world in different styles. The food that is being shared and the utensils that are being used vary, but sharing food still creates situations where people form ties and memories. It is shaped by social codes like manners, order and conversations (2013:151). By studying food and eating as such a phenomenon, we can gain insights to how to contribute to a sustainable food consumption. Not to give one simple answer, or aim to do so, but to acknowledge that we live in a world where we as individuals are faced with multiple choices on an everyday basis and try to understand the complexity of those choices. As argued by sociologist Julie M. Parsons everyday foodways can have the power to determine who we are and where we belong. It can be a way to distinguish social groups and to separate the "self" from the "other" (2015:1). Studying sociocultural behaviour, meanings and identities can be one way to make sense of food consumption and a tool in the work towards sustainability. As Ehn and Löfgren argues, we can address big societal issues like gender, class, identity and the boundaries between the public and private by studying everyday lives (2012:7). This thesis will not attempt to give the full explanation to the complexity of these issues, but highlight the connection between food consumption and societal issues. The mundane events of everyday life can say so much more about our world than we might have initially thought.

## 1.2 Aim and research questions

As argued, there is a need to understand the social and cultural meanings of food if we are to understand food consumption. This study aims to address how food consumers navigate the choices presented to them and how different social contexts, relationships and

identities can influence and shape food-consumption patterns. By studying different people's views on eating experiences, food consumption habits and dietary choices, the aim is to contribute to the understanding of how value, meaning and identity is created in relation to food and how those meanings impact how consumers navigate between different choices of food consumption. By exploring how the different sociocultural contexts around food, diets and meals can impact choices of consumption, the intention is to contribute to a deeper understanding of how we can work towards sustainable food-consumption patterns. Some specific choices will be mentioned when it comes to food shopping and diets, but the focus of this study is not the food itself, but the relationships, habits and meanings surrounding it.

The aim will be fulfilled through answering the following research questions: How can the sociocultural contexts around food and its consumption impact the choices consumers make? How are meanings, values, identities and power structures shaped, produced and reproduced in relation to food and eating experiences? How can eating habits change over time and what different factors can influence these changes in food consumption?

### 1.3 Disposition

The research questions will be answered and elaborated on in the following chapters. First, previous research connected to the field will be presented to contextualise this study. This is followed by a section on methodology, including ethical considerations, and a presentation of the sources for the material. Building on that, the theoretical perspectives will be presented, followed by analysis and discussion.

The first theme for the analysis discusses what makes a meal and addresses the meaning of the meal situation as a social context. The second theme is around food as a tool of orientation, where the meaning of feeling at home and finding our way in relation to food and eating habits will be discussed. The third theme focuses on the negotiation of the when, what and how of a meal. The fourth theme discusses the impact of social, cultural and economic capital on eating habits. The fifth and last theme is orienting the landscape of food consumption where the discussion will return to the meaning of feeling at home and finding a place in relation to food and meal situations.

In conclusion, the main findings and the applicability of the research will be discussed followed by suggestions for further research.

## 2 Previous research

Come and sit down... This intimate domestic scene is reproduced across the world, in different styles of homes, with different food and utensils, but everywhere shared by people who are close to one another: kin, in-laws or friends. These are patterned events where the sharing of food — commensality — reinforces ties, forges new memories and allows people to reflect on the importance of eating together (Crowther 2013:150).

The quote above is the introduction to Gillian Crowther's fourth chapter in "Eating Culture — An anthropological guide to food", and illustrates how food consumption and sharing a meal connects to social dynamics and values. As food is a topic that can be viewed from many perspectives, there is a massive amount of research conducted in this area. The focus here will be on studies that relate to food as a cultural and social phenomenon to give an overview of the context in which this research is conducted. However, even in this case, it is only a small selection of available research in the field.

### 2.1 Culture, identity and community

As Meghan Cridland argues, food has shown to be a useful ethnological opening to the study of lived experiences and how things become meaningful in everyday life (2017:24). Numerous previous studies have been made around food and how it relates to culture, identity, community and traditions. Research has been conducted around food and social interactions (Jansson 1993), views on industrially produced food (Håkansson 2018), the rise of Nordic cuisine (Pétursson, Lindqvist & Österlund-Pötzsch 2018), food culture from an overall perspective (Crowther 2013, Genrup 1988) and sustainable eating practices (Marshall 2016). Ethnologist Håkan Jönsson has studied food from a cultural perspective in his work around milk (2005), restaurant culture in Sweden (Tellström & Jönsson 2019) and culinary tourism (Ekström & Jönsson 2016). As argued in the Swedish ethnological anthology "Mat: Genealogi och Gestaltning", food is a useful topic for ethnology as it can impact both physical bodies and social relationships, while being both a product and generator of cultural processes (Burstedt, Fredriksson, & Jönsson, 2006). The social and cultural aspect of food is also addressed by anthropologist Gillian Crowther, the author of the quote at the beginning of this chapter, who argues that whether food is produced locally or globally, it will always be consumed locally and is an important foundation for society and culture (2013:17).

Ethnologist Anna Burstedt has studied food from a cultural analytical perspective by exploring its connections to place and identity (2001), genealogy and performance (2006).

Highlighting how food culture relates to place and belonging (Burstedt 2001) connects to this thesis as it explores how food consumers negotiate their identities in relation to their cultural context. A cultural analytical perspective on food has also been provided by ethnologist Meghan Cridland, who has studied oat milk consumers relation to health, identity and social life (2012). Cridland has also studied the development of eating in communities by looking at the material, social, practical and emotional aspects of the gluten-free diet (2017). Her work relates to this study as it highlights food as a way to build community and negotiate identities. Even though this thesis is not focused on one specific diet, it is relevant to bring up how dietary choices are not just physical and medical, but cultural and social as well. Ethnologist Mine Sylow has provided us with a cultural analytical perspective on diets and eating habits in her study of children and adolescents in Denmark that highlights the connection between food culture, community, belonging and public health (2008). The indication of a connection between cultural processes and issues such as public health is of relevance for this thesis as it highlights the sociocultural aspects of food consumers' choices.

Ethnologist Karin Salomonsson has also provided important insights on food consumption and identity in her study on cultural heritage and European identity. Her research highlights the cultural construction of place and ethics as she analyses the way food production in Europe is marketed and communicated. Salomonsson raises the topic of how a European identity is culturally constructed and the process of rhetorically connecting values such as empathy, ethics and legitimacy to Europe through culinary cultural heritage (Salomonsson 2001). It relates to this thesis as the way food production is marketed and communicated and how ethics are culturally constructed has an impact on food consumers' choices.

This is only a small selection of the research that has been conducted around food, diets and eating habits within the area of cultural analysis, ethnology and anthropology, and it shows how food is so much more than nutrients and ingredients. It is a cultural phenomenon connected to power and economical aspects that plays a role in producing and reproducing norms and traditions, attitudes and identities.

## 2.2 Gender roles

Sören Jansson points to cultural and social aspects of food in "Maten och det sociala samspelet: Etnologiska perspektiv på matvanor", where he discusses the gender issue connected to food, meals and eating habits. He argues that, for a long time, meat has had a certain social status connected to success, that the way we relate to meat and vegetables can

be an effective method of emphasizing masculinity or femininity, and that women are more influenced by social circumstances and change when it comes to eating habits (1993:18-31). The gender aspect of cooking has also been studied by ethnologist Beatriz Borda, who has researched the role food plays as an identity marker for South American immigrants in Sweden. Her work points to how food enacts gendered relationships, a sense of space and community (1987) and highlights how buying, cooking and serving food is seen as a woman's responsibility in Latin America (Ibid.:52). Anthropologist Joy Adapon discusses gender and cooking in "Culinary Art and Anthropology", as well. As a part of her study Adapon points to the connection between cooking, culinary arts and ideals around womanhood. She brings forward how women are valued through their cooking and how gender comes to play in social activities around food (2008:71-88). Sociologist Julie M. Parsons has written about gender, food and class in her book "Gender, class and food: families, bodies and health" (2015). In her research, she analyses how everyday foodways relate to the performance of gender and class. As Parsons argues, the manner of everyday foodways and how food is presented, served and consumed fill a function of constituting social differences and that such cultural practices are also gendered (Ibid.:5). Her work highlights narratives around the self, identity and how it connects to "others", as well as structural and sociocultural norms and values (Ibid.:162). Even though this thesis has a different main focus than that of gender, it will always be present when studying social and cultural processes.

### 2.3 Food as a social and artistic practice

In "Eating Culture — An anthropological guide to food", Gillian Crowther brings up several aspects of food consumption and the social and cultural context surrounding it. From global food production and agriculture to cookbooks and street food, Crowther's work shows that what we eat is always a part of a complex social context and that studying such contexts can give us an understanding of other issues as well (2013). It indicates that, while we may divide different areas of food consumption into chapters and categories, they are all connected to each other. In chapter six, Crowther discusses the gastro-politics of eating, such as mealtimes, feasts and private versus public, bringing up the issue of when, what, how, where and who in relation to meals (Ibid:149-176) that will be further discussed in the analysis for this thesis. Ethnologist Beatriz Borda has also highlighted the importance of the social context around food, as she has researched the role food plays for Latin Americans in Sweden. Bringing up how meal habits change depending on national contexts and how sharing a meal can be an important social and cultural practice (Borda 1987), her work

indicates that eating together, both with your family and with others, can be an important part of feeling at home, negotiating identities and building community.

As Joy Adapon points to in "Culinary Art and Anthropology", food can be understood both as an embodied skill and an artistic practice. Food can be studied through the concept of flavour in everyday life and the way different cooking traditions are reproduced through a creative process (2008). Adapon describes her study as "focused on cooking as a deeply meaningful social activity" (Ibid.:3) and that will be the focus for this research as well. This study will explore different aspects of the way meaning is given to food and how it can be a carrier of identity, cultural values and a sense of belonging. By viewing food from different perspectives, from buying and preparing it to eating and experiencing it, we can gain new insights to the sociocultural meanings of food and meals. This thesis is intended to contribute to the already existing knowledge around food culture by analysing connections between eating habits, meal situations and the choices food consumers make. It will highlight various aspects food consumption, from how the informants plan their meals and navigate between different choices in grocery stores to how they consume their meals, alone or together, to study food habits as an activity connected to cultural processes.

### 3 Material and methodology

What can a qualitative approach provide us with when it comes to food and the consumption of it? How can a deeper analysis of the social and cultural aspects of food consumption help us understand other issues and how to work with them? As Patricia L. Sunderland and Rita M. Denny explains in "Doing anthropology in consumer research", everyday practices like the consumption of coffee and other goods are cultural matters. Therefore, the responses in the interviews, the direction the conversation takes, what the informant seems to believe is important or not, the tone of voice, and what is talked about and not talked about can all be important data (2007:59).

Qualitative ethnographic methods can help us delve deeper into what food means to people beyond ingredients and nutritional value. Studying different contexts surrounding food, how it is consumed and with who, when and why, can help us understand larger societal and cultural issues. The material for this thesis is based on in-depth interviews to delve further into the understandings and meanings around food, the consumption of it and social contexts surrounding it. The chosen methods are not ethnographic or cultural analytical in and of themselves, but are made so through an anthropological and ethnological framework. It is a way of seeing data as something that is not gathered or collected, but created and produced in the interaction between me as a researcher and the field (Ibid. 50-53). As a cultural analyst, it is not my intention to neglect my impact on the material, but rather see my views and my presence in the field as an active part of this work. This will be further elaborated on in this chapter on methodology.

#### 3.1 Phenomenology and ethnography

This research is based on a phenomenological approach with the intention to focus on lived experiences and descriptions of these to provide a foundation for an in-depth analysis. By analysing descriptions of certain situations and experiences, underlying structures can be revealed (Moustakas 1994:10-11). The relation between people, places and objects is central for a phenomenological approach, as it acknowledges the way we make sense of the world through our environment. We approach and relate to the world around us based on cultural categories, but it is the participation in our environment and the interaction with both other people and objects that constitutes us as social beings and provides us with knowledge of cultural categories (Hansen & Salomonsson 2001). In this work, food is studied not just as a

material object, but through the way people connect to others through it, create meaning around it and how it is used as a tool to make sense of the world.

The phenomenological approach can be viewed both as a theoretical perspective and a methodological tool. As Sunderland and Denny writes, it is the anthropological perspectives that defines certain methods as ethnographic, not the choice of method in itself. It is not the conduction of interviews or observations in themselves that defines a phenomenological approach, but the questions we ask and how we contemplate on our own perspectives, views and assumptions (Sunderland & Dennis 2007:48-53). When researching culture as ongoing processes, rather than something that just is, it is also inevitable that we as researchers are a part of it. This acknowledgement of how I take part in the field, both how my body takes up space and impacts the room and what views I bring into the interview situations, will be present throughout this work.

As previously discussed, this work analyses culture as something that is produced and reproduced in everyday life rather than a logical and rigid system of meanings, codes and symbols. Human beings, their senses, emotions, practices and descriptions of these, are central to contribute to the understanding of food as a cultural phenomenon (Ehn & Löfgren 2012:13). The focus during the interviews has been the everyday habits of food and meals, but in the end, it is not about the food itself but the meanings, identities, norms, values and bigger societal issues that are reflected in these practices. Therefore, qualitative methods and a focus on lived experience can provide us with insights on how to work with the challenges we are facing as a society. The phenomenological perspectives presented by Sara Ahmed in "Queer Phenomenology — Orientations, objects, others" (2006) have been a fundamental part of this work both as a theoretical framework and as a part of the field work. It has given me the tools to elaborate on how bodies unfold in physical and social spaces and how our position and direction influences what we see and how we see it (2006:19-20). This can be applied both to the stories told by my informants and to my position as researcher. Being aware of my own position in the field and how I navigate the sociocultural space I am studying creates opportunities for new insights and understandings. The material is being given meaning by me as much as my informants and the interview situations is as much a space where cultural meaning is created as the situations reflected upon in the informants stories and experiences.



### 3.2 Interviews

As this study contributes to a cultural analytical approach to food consumption, the main material consists of qualitative interviews conducted through the lens of phenomenology and ethnography. These interviews focused on themes around food, eating habits, identity and community. All of the interviews were conducted in Lund or Malmö and it is also the home cities of the informants. All of the interviews were conducted and transcribed by me. The location of the interviews was either my home or the homes of the informants. The intention was to have a diverse group of informants with regard to nationality, gender, age and cultural background. However, it was not intended to make them representatives for certain groups, but to create a nuanced material that provides this study with different perspectives on what food and eating can be. As the informants are of different genders, age and cultural backgrounds they have different ideas of what a good meal is and what is important when it comes to food. This has been a resource throughout the work as I have been made aware of views, perspectives and positions different from my own. It has also created interviews where the informants themselves have reflected upon how their meal habits have changed in different contexts and over time. The diversity of perspectives makes the material suitable to explore different aspects of food culture and how meaning is created, transferred and reproduced in connection to food consumption.

For this thesis, I conducted interviews with 7 informants — 4 women and 3 men; 4 born and raised in Sweden and 3 moved here as adults from different countries. I came into contact with the informants through my personal network, by asking on social media and by asking friends if they had relatives or friends interested in participating. I did not require the informants to have any specific interest in food, as the hope was to get a variety of perspectives on food and eating experiences, but in agreeing to interview on the topic, there was probably some kind of prior interest. For example, I noticed that several of my informants seem to have reflected on their food choices themselves and have an intention to make conscious choices around what they eat and why. However, I still believe that they provide a variety of perspectives. The focus is not on them as individuals, but the norms, habits, meanings and values that are reflected on in the interviews. For that purpose, the material is strong in representing different backgrounds and experiences. One potential weakness that I have reflected on, however, is the homogeneity when it comes to level of education and privilege. Compared to the general public, I would say that my informants have a high level of cultural, social and economic capital, and they are all in some way

conscious consumers even though the definition of that is subjective. What is referred to as a conscious consumer in this case, is someone who attempts to make active choices based on their values and current level of knowledge. As much as this can change over time, there is a need to address the will to make conscious choices, as it reflects upon processes in our society and the previously discussed shift to individual choices. However, despite the aspect of privilege and capital, the material is strong for the aim of this thesis and it has been very helpful to explore the sociocultural contexts around meals, eating habits and food consumption. This potential weakness can be used as a strength by asking what is taking for granted in certain sociocultural contexts and bringing forward aspects of privilege and capital. Definitions of capital and conscious consumption, and the meaning this can have for food consumption patterns, will be discussed and elaborated upon further in upcoming chapters.

The interviews were semi-structured and followed different themes depending on the informants. I had different topics in mind when I started my field work, but focused on open questions. All interviews have begun with me asking "What do you normally eat on an everyday basis?". From there, other topics started to unfold and I asked follow-up questions to make the informants elaborate on their thoughts and experiences. I tried to reflect back what the informants were saying and followed up with questions rather than give responses that reveals my own opinions and ideas. Nonetheless, I am aware that my position as a researcher has an impact on the material no matter what I do and my agenda was never to remain neutral or objective. As a cultural researcher it is rather my intention to be aware of and transparent with my subjectivity and role in the field. Constantly asking myself what views, perspectives and questions I bring with me into every situation and being aware that I play an active role in the production of my material as it is created in an interaction between me and my informants (Sunderland & Denny 48-53).

All the interviews were transcribed by me and that has been an important part of the analytical process. During the transcription work, I was able to process the material and noticed certain themes and connections that have resulted in the themes for this thesis. It made me reevaluate some of the views, thoughts and ideas I had at the beginning of the process and it provided me with an overview of the material and ideas around what could be important for this work. Constantly revaluing the aim and research questions during the process of the field work has been key to new perspectives and understandings. Transcribing and writing simultaneously helped me reflect upon and analyse the material, including my own fields notes and points of view, from different angles. The research process has not been

linear or set in stone, but something that has been constantly changing and developed along with new insights.

### 3.3 Ethical considerations

At first, food may not come across as a sensitive subject. Yet, it does connect to many problematic issues that could be sensitive in an interview situation. Using Ahmed's tools of orientation, dining situations can be viewed as sociocultural spaces in which we orientate ourselves and aim to find a sense of direction. Our bodies, our positions and the directions we are pointed to impacts how we view these spaces. The directions we are pointed to and the paths we are expected to follow may feel easy and unproblematic to some, but not to others (Ahmed 2006:16-23), and by bringing this forward we can research an everyday topic such as food with more awareness. Food can for example bring up questions of ethics or remind someone of an eating disorder or other diseases. It can connect to feelings and memories and be a way of expressing power and divide people as well as uniting them. For me as a researcher, it was a dilemma to limit my influence on the informants' answers. I was also careful not to point the conversation in directions that might be uncomfortable for the informants. As I myself have an interest in food and the culture around it, it was a balance to not reveal too much of my own thoughts as it could have an impact on what an informant decides to say or not to say. However, sharing some thoughts and confirming what the informant says can also be important to some extent to build a relationship. Bringing up certain topics and getting a conversation started can also be of importance for the material and the analysis. In this case, the conversations were very easy going and the informants were interested in talking about the subject, so I really did not feel the need to talk that much at all. Nonetheless, no matter how much I try, I will always influence my material both through my presence in the interview situation and in my way of processing and analysing the material.

When it comes to the ethical dilemmas of conducting cultural research, it is important to remember that we will always influence our material in some way. Just being in a certain setting as a researcher and interviewing someone for a purpose creates a power dynamic, especially when studying a cultural and social phenomenon in a context that we are a part of. Therefore, it is of importance to use reflexivity as a tool and view our own reactions and ideas as an asset. My intention is not to erase my impact on the material and the study but rather to make myself visible as a part of the cultural context I am studying, both during the field work and analysis of the material. A part of the ethical considerations for this project was also to protect the informants' identities and receiving their consent to participate and to

use the material for this study. Their names will not be revealed in this thesis and I have tried to reduce the amount of written information about their ethnicities, backgrounds and social status to only include the information that contributes to this thesis. As this research is conducted in big cities with many people that have similar backgrounds as the informants, I would argue that their personal identities are not at risk of being revealed. I would also like to claim that even though food consumption can be a subject charged with meanings and ideas, it is not a topic that would put the informants at personal risk if their identities should be revealed.

### 3.4 Reflexivity

*One thing that becomes clear when I talk to people with another background than me is how much I take for granted. How even I, an ethnologist who thinks of myself as very aware of how our social and cultural context is 'invisible' to ourselves, carry with me assumptions that may not be clear to someone else. I constantly have to question myself and my position in the field, take a step back and reflect on what I say and how who I am has an impact on the interviews. That I aim to keep my questions open and not put any value into the responses, doesn't mean that I always succeed. I'm just as much a carrier of culture as my informants, and the material is created between us, in an interaction between different experiences and values. (Field notes, 2020)*

As reflected upon in my field notes, and as previously mentioned, it has been important to be aware of my own position in the field. Food can in some ways be considered a low-risk topic from an ethical point of view, as we often share these experiences with others, but it is still a subject loaded with values and ideals. As food and eating habits can be a way to distinguish class and power structures, create inclusion and exclusion, express who we are and are not, it is impossible to not have any impact on the material. Just me being present in the interview situation have implications. I also have to navigate and interpret what people say that they do, representing an ideal construct of their culture, and what they actually do in the reality of everyday life (Crowther 2013:22). Qualitative interviews and reflexivity are great tools to create deeper understandings of what we do, but this research is still a subjective matter where I as a researcher am a part of the field and it should be read and understood from that perspective.

Therefore, I want to make myself more visible in my work by briefly explaining my background and relationship with food.

Food has had several different meanings for me throughout my life. I have a history of eating disorders and I have been on several different diets. Stemming from that, I started to seriously reflect upon ideals around health and power and how it is socially constructed. I started problematising the idea of health that actually drove me to a place of severe health issues and I started to think more and more about how our food consumption is shaped by norms, ideals and power relations. For me, this is also the case when it comes to areas such as sustainability where there is a wish to change behaviours. When I was younger, I was a lacto-ovo vegetarian, meaning I did not eat meat but other animal products. I thought it was the right thing to do and at that point it was a very simple choice for me. As I became more and more interested in sustainability, I realised how complex the issue of food production is. For example, I realised that the egg and milk industry produced meat as well, and that the choices I had thought to be so simple were actually very complex. I also started reading discussions about how vegan products are produced with manure from the animal industry and I started gaining knowledge of what a huge difference there is between different types of food production and their part in the ecosystem. This made me reflect upon norms and how easy it is to become unaware of your own social context. It also made me see how hard it can be as a consumer to make the right choices when there are so many options presented to us. Even if you view yourself as a conscious consumer, it might be hard to know what to do, as almost endless individual choices are a part of our culture and everyday lives. Should I be vegan or eat meat from grass-fed animals? Should I eat organic products that have been imported or locally produced non-organic? What do I do when the answers sometimes vary depending on if we focus on climate, health, biodiversity or animal ethics? My aim here is not to give an answer to which diet to choose from an environmental perspective, as I am not sure myself, but rather highlight the complexity of individual choices and show how the cultural dimension of food consumption has an impact on how we eat, especially as it takes a lot of capital to navigate our almost endless amount of choices.

So why start with meals and the sociocultural context around food? Well, both as a vegetarian and when I was on different diets, meal situations and food consumption was always a loaded issue. For me, food has almost never been the mundane and simple thing that it may be to some people. During the many years I did not eat meat, I received comments about it at numerous dinner parties, which did not stop until I started eating meat again. When I was dieting, I had to take a step away from social events as it made me feel bad not to eat

sweets or other types of food not a part of my diet. This is one of the reasons why Sara Ahmed's theoretical concepts came to mind when I decided to study food culture. As a person who has often felt disorientated in the landscape of food habits and choices, I have experienced first-hand how our relationship with food can play a huge role in how we take up space and find a sense of direction in this world. For me it has been clear that there are paths and directions that we are expected to follow and that it is not always easy to navigate the different directions we are pointed to at the same time (Ahmed 2006:6-19).

For me, the view on food as a cultural matter has developed over time as I have observed my surroundings and the everyday situations where meaning is created in relation to food. I have been in more casual situations in cafeterias where people discussed their food boxes and what they ate last night for dinner. I have talked to friends who think it is hard to make different dietary choices because it would be difficult to maintain in the social contexts they are a part of. Over time and with my experiences I have developed an interest in how we form relationships, exchange values, create traditions and shape our identity in relation to food consumption. I have understood how many larger issues food is connected to, from norms and power structures to sustainability and health, and that interest is why I decided to write my thesis on this topic.

As cultural analysts, it is important to be mindful of our own narratives, privileges and perspectives. When studying and working with culture, norms and human behaviour, we are always in some way a part of the field we are studying. This is also the case for other professionals aiming to achieve behaviour change in areas of food consumption. How can we become aware of our own ideas, values, positions and experiences and use them as an asset in our work? For example, my own experiences of struggling with eating disorders and revaluing my view on food has helped me enter the field with curiosity and a general understanding that people may have different reasons behind what they do. I know from experience that food can be a source of stress and that economical and practical circumstances can create challenges that makes it hard for us to make choices that we may prefer from an ethical perspective. Sometimes I have had to choose non-organic products for economic reasons and simple solutions such as ready-made food as a tired mother. Going into the field with empathy, curiosity and an ambition to read between the lines and understand why people do what they do can be of great contribution to our work. Our experiences can help us open up to new questions and understandings if we are transparent and aware of our position in the field. By asking ourselves questions around what food means to us, we can make the invisible visible and bring forward how our views, questions and assumptions has

been a part of creating the material (Sunderland & Denny 2007:48-51). Being aware of my position and perspectives makes it possible to make the invisible visible and see how others do not have the same opportunities, which is the foundation of this analysis as the way we navigate the social landscape of food consumption depends on our position and level of capital.

### 3.5 Material

The material this thesis builds upon is a collection of experiences and reflections on food consumption and how it connects to symbolic meanings, sociocultural norms, identity, relationships and social contexts. It reveals different aspects of how food culture is produced and reproduced through lived experiences. As mentioned above, the material consists of 7 in-depth interviews conducted in Lund and Malmö during 2019 and 2020, and transcribed by me. The length of the interviews ranges between 38 and 59 minutes. The quotes that are included in this thesis have been edited to increase readability, but the meanings have not been altered. Some of the quotes have been translated from Swedish to English. This could be an ethical dilemma in some cases, but as the quotes in question do not touch upon sensitive subjects and the meaning in general has not been changed, I have considered it not to be problematic in this case. The meaning of what we say is always open to interpretation, and my main focus has been to convey what I believe was the informants' main point in said context. My field notes are also part of the material, and a quote has been included in this chapter, but focus will be on the interviews.

## 4 Theoretical framework

Food will in this work be viewed as something that is practiced and embodied in everyday life, from planning and buying ingredients to cooking and consuming meals both alone and with others. My academic knowledge has been influenced by several theoretical perspectives which has given me tools to view cultural processes from different angles and perspectives. I sometimes find it hard to fully separate the wide variation of theoretical starting points I have been influenced by, as they are in many ways connected and overlapping. Just as human behaviour and culture is complex, flexible and everchanging, I would argue that there is a need for theoretical flexibility to provide an in-depth analysis of a cultural phenomenon. However, this work rests upon an understanding of culture as something that is constantly produced and reproduced rather than a fixed and logical system. The focus is on people, their emotions and practices of everyday life (Ehn & Löfgren 2012:13) and how this is connected to bigger issues and phenomena in society. This understanding has shaped the entire research process from brainstorming and planning to the collection of material and analysis.

Even though my knowledge and research practices are shaped by several different theories, two of them will provide the main perspectives for the analysis. These two are Sara Ahmed's "Queer Phenomenology — Orientations, Objects, Others" (2006) and Pierre Bourdieu's "Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste" (1984). By combining these two theoretical perspectives, food can be analysed both from a phenomenological point of view, with a focus on everyday life and lived experiences, and with a critical perspective on class and taste. In this chapter I will develop why I have decided to use these theories and how they will be applied to this work.

### 4.1 Sara Ahmed

Sara Ahmed's "Queer phenomenology — Orientations, Objects, Others" came to mind even before starting the field work and it has shaped my research from the start. Ahmed explains how we become orientated in times of disorientation, how we make our way and how we come to feel at home in certain social contexts. She highlights how orientation and disorientation can be a tool to understand how the body unfolds in a physical and social space and how certain spaces leave room for some bodies and not others. Disorientation can also be understood as the feeling of not knowing who we are. By following expected paths we can get a sense of direction and feeling of who we are, where we belong and how we can come to



feel at home in certain social contexts. When we feel at home, we may not be aware of our feeling of orientation, and by exploring times of disorientation we can understand what it means to be orientated in the first place (Ahmed 2006).

Queer phenomenology has provided this research with theoretical concepts and tools to analyse how we make sense of the sociocultural space of food consumption. By applying the idea of orientation to food consumption and eating habits, we can understand what gives people a sense of direction, aim and purpose. As Ahmed argues, the concept of orientation allows us to make visible how our lives are often directed in some ways more than others. As a part of a social and cultural context we are given certain directions and we are being expected to follow certain paths to be a part of that context. The concept of disorientation is here understood as the experience of losing the sense of who we are, our aim and purpose. It is not just a matter of our direction in a physical space but a matter of the social and cultural values in that space and how we navigate in relation to those values (Ibid.).

So how does this relate to food? As mentioned before, food can carry different meanings depending on the way we choose to study it. Here, food will be seen as a carrier of social meaning and something central for a sense of identity and community. Therefore, Ahmed's perspectives can be applied to analyse how the informants navigate social spaces and negotiate their identities through food and eating experiences. It can be a way to make sense of how people navigate between different choices when it comes to food consumption. It can bring forward lived experiences of how it feels to be orientated or choosing a different path and direction than that one has been directed to. By applying Ahmed's concepts to this topic, we can dig deeper into how people navigate the landscape of food consumption and how the social spaces they are in influence the directions taken as individual consumers. That by making certain choices around food, one may feel a sense of orientation, aim and purpose in a sociocultural space.

Ahmed's perspectives have provided this thesis with tools to view the consumption of food as a lived experience and to explore how people navigate the social landscape of food consumption. It provides the analysis with an explanation of how consumers orientate themselves in contexts where they have to make individual choices around food and how it can create feelings of orientation or disorientation. By applying the concept of orientation, we can deepen the analysis on how people make choices around food in relation to norms, other people and social spaces.

## 4.2 Pierre Bourdieu

As we come to understand food as a social phenomenon we also come across themes of power and privilege. Food can create a sense of belonging and connection, but it can also create exclusion and contribute to power structures. These issues can be addressed by applying Ahmed's theoretical perspectives, discussing orientation and how we come to feel at home in social contexts around food. However, I have decided to apply Pierre Bourdieu's concept of capital as well to deepen the analysis around privileges and how capital and taste influences food consumers choices. By combining Ahmed's concepts with Bourdieu's theoretical perspectives, we can create a deep understanding of how power structures take place in the events and habits of everyday life.

Bourdieu's theoretical tools will be applied to deepen the understanding of taste and its relation to choices of food consumption. Bourdieu claims that our position in the social space is defined by a combination of our habitus, our social background, and the possession of social, economic and cultural capital. He argues that what is defined as good taste is most likely distinguished by those with a high level of cultural capital. This definition of taste within society forms the distinction between high and low culture and shapes our ideas of what is considered natural or legitimate. From this perspective, our view of a social space is shaped by our position within it (1984). Economical capital can be explained in terms of income and wealth, cultural capital can be explained as the institutionalized, embodied and objectified and social capital can be explained as relationships and networks. Symbolic capital is then the conversations around and the legitimisation of the other forms of capital as these are significant resources in the definition of what is considered legitimate versus illegitimate taste (Bourdieu 1996).

But, can the French class structures from Bourdieu's field study be translated into a Swedish modern context? As ethnologist Anna Burstedt argues, taste as a social marker is interesting from an ethnological perspective even though the context may differ. Just as in Burstedt's study, Bourdieu's theoretical perspectives will not be used to define a culinary class in this case but to analyse the meaning of status and cultural values. The meaning of taste as culinary capital is not viewed here as something static that people possess but something people do as an ongoing process (Burstedt 2018:133-134). Bourdieu's capital concept will be applied to analyse how food and eating habits can be defined by ideas of what good taste is and what choices are considered to be legitimate in certain social settings. They will provide this thesis with a framework to explain how we may change our eating habits

over time as we possess more economical, social and cultural capital. The context for this research is different from that of Bourdieu's work, and his concepts are applied and interpreted in others ways, but the main idea of how the social space is distinguished by taste and capital is still relevant. As the landscape of food consumption has changed and there has been a shift towards individual choices, the concept of taste can be applied to discussions around ethics and conscious consumerism as well. It can help us understand how economic, cultural and social capital plays a role in what choices food consumers make. The idea of how our positions shape our view of a social space connects to Ahmed's perspectives and these two will be combined to add to the understanding of food consumption as a cultural phenomenon.

## 5 Analysis

### 5.1 What makes a meal?

As previously mentioned, the focus for this analysis will be the social and cultural dimensions of food consumption. During the interviews, I asked my informants how they normally eat on an everyday basis and from that we entered topics around food consumption as a sociocultural phenomenon. One of my informants explains:

*I think that maybe it matters that I usually eat by myself. Since I live by myself and don't have anyone else to think about. The thing is that I've noticed that people seem to adjust a lot to if they are eating together with others, then they make it into something fun. But if they are eating alone, it's kind of just for nutrition. And I don't buy that. I can think during the work day 'what should I cook tonight' for myself and then I go and shop for that and make something nice. (Interview 5 2020)*

If we want to answer the question of what makes a good meal, we first need to acknowledge that there is no one answer. Here, the informant describes how he plans and cooks meals for himself, as he is living alone, and that he likes to make something nice just for himself. He also reflects upon how others seem to eat differently depending on if they are eating alone or with others. He is aware that there may be differences in other people's food habits depending on the social context even though he does things differently. This can be understood using Ahmed's perspectives on orientation. The informant is aware of what other people seem to be doing, which in this case is eating differently depending on if they are alone or with others, but he still chooses another direction. Even though he is eating alone, he is navigating the social space of food consumption by not following the path of what he thinks other people are doing (Ahmed 2006). Norms, directions and expectations may influence us and be a part of our awareness even when we do not act according to them. Another informant explains:

*I don't eat a lot of fruit. I'm not very fond of fruit. I know it's very healthy but... I like apples, but it has to be really good apples. The really expensive apples. Good apples. And they're not available in all stores. And sometimes I buy those apples and still when I start to eat they are a bit dry and not as I like*

*them... So... I'm very picky actually. I like simple things, but I choose with care and I'm picky with what I buy, so it's not a lot. (Interview 7 2020)*

Here she mentions taste as an important aspect when it comes to deciding what to eat. She is aware of the nutritional aspect of food, and eating fruit in particular, but when she decides to buy something, that is not her main focus. She also needs to adjust to what is available in the stores, as she explains when she says that the apples she likes are not available everywhere. Here we can see how the context we are in shape our consumption patterns. This experience reflects upon how both the practical availability of different types of food matters but also the awareness of societal norms. Through the concept of orientation we can understand it as if she is becoming orientated both in relation to the physical space of the store and the social space of what is considered to be healthy. Even if she says that she usually does not eat a lot of fruit, she is aware that the norm exists and orientates herself in relation to it. In this case, taste and health are two different directions she is pointed to (Ahmed 2006), but taste is still the factor that influences her choices the most. She continues:

*From my childhood I have this simple traditional homecooked food with me. That it's what tastes good. And that's really the base of good food for me. It's simple products, it's simple food... When I grew up there were no ready-made dishes and such. So it was simple homecooked food, simple or more complicated? But with simple products at least. No table of contents. You know, it was carrots, it was potatoes, it was meat that was bought at the butchers or a chicken bought at the square that you had to pick apart yourself. So it was kind of... And I kept on cooking that food here, and I was always so surprised when I came to Sweden that there was so much ready-made, you know, things that are ready in a package. I remember my surprise when I was at the store and everyone had mostly boxes and packaging and I had real food. And I thought, maybe it will be good? It had such amazing pictures. You know, ready-made pies and that. And yes, I remember I bought them sometimes, and they usually weren't bad, but they weren't really good. And they were quite expensive. I know we had some ready-made dishes when one of my daughters was young that we thought were okay, but they were only okay. For a quick solution. And they were very expensive. I had three kids and I was a single mom so... I couldn't go with those. (Interview 7 2020)*

Here, she explains how her childhood has influenced her ideas about what a good meal is. She also mentions the exposure to a new country and culture where things work differently. This is an example of how we are sometimes not aware of orientation until we are faced with a new situation. Moving to a new country can create such feeling of disorientation as some types of food, ingredients and ways of cooking makes us feel at home (Ahmed 2006). The economical aspect and her level of capital (Bourdieu 1984) also mattered as she is a single mother. As we can see here, what is considered to be a good meal is socially and culturally shaped and it can vary from one context to another. Hence, the consumption of food can be a tool to become orientated and at home in, for example, a new country. We are constantly navigating the social space of food consumption and orientate ourselves in relation to both existing norms and our current social context. When we follow certain directions and expectations, we can navigate and find our place in a new social context (Ahmed 2006), but there are different aspects, such as capital, that can make it harder or easier. Capital in this case is both the economic capital that makes it possible to buy certain products, but also cultural capital in the form of knowledge around what to buy, cook and eat. Our choices of food consumption are influenced by both our financial circumstances and ideas of what is considered good food and a good meal (Bourdieu 1984). This informant brings with her the view that good food is made from simple ingredients and homecooked. Moving to a new country brings with it a new social context and new views of what is considered a good meal, which can create a feeling of disorientation.

As we can see here, capital also becomes more complex in a globalised world. What is considered good taste, good food and a good meal differs between different countries and social contexts as reflected upon in this interview. Hence, food and eating can be an arena both for inclusion and exclusion. It can be a way of finding our path and feeling at home in a new social context, but it can also create a feeling of disorientation if we end up in situations, like new countries or social events, where our idea of what a good meal is differs from the norm. By studying the meaning of a good meal in different contexts we can deepen the understanding of the complexity of food consumption.

## 5.2 Food as a tool of orientation

So how can food function as a tool to navigate a new social context, for example when moving to a new country or getting to know new people? Situations around food, and what actions we take in those situations, can both make us feel orientated and disorientated. It

can both give us a sense of direction and make us feel lost (Ahmed 2006). As one of my informants, who moved to Sweden as an adult to study here, explains:

*At some point when I was living in a corridor, I had the opportunity to share a kitchen with so many other people from here and different parts of the world. Then I started to learn also how to cook western food. Since that time, I mostly eat that. Especially after the kids were born, the kids they have never been to Ethiopia so they're mostly accustomed to Swedish food. So now, we eat a lot of Swedish food; like a lot of lax, potatoes, chicken, meatballs and all that kind of stuff. (Interview 4 2020)*

This example indicates how food consumption can change over time and through new social contexts. Two major changes are mentioned in this quote: living in a corridor with people from other backgrounds and having children. One way of understanding this change is that the informant has changed his food habits as he increased his level of cultural capital through social situations around food where he has gained new knowledge around what to eat and how to eat it (Bourdieu 1984). Another way of understanding it is to see that the informant has been able to use food and meal situations to navigate new social situations and become orientated. Adjusting to Swedish cooking when moving here can be one way to feel a sense of direction and feel at home in a new social space. From this perspective, the meal can also be a situation where we come to feel disorientated and lost. However, by becoming disorientated and feeling lost, we can learn what it means to be orientated in that specific social context and find a sense of direction (Ahmed 2006) by doing what other people are doing. As one of my informants who is vegan explains:

*When I'm out travelling, it can be hard. Especially abroad. But here in Sweden too. I travel a lot in my work, in Germany and in Sweden. And when I say I'm a vegan in advance, there is still vegetarian lasagne for dinner, and I ask "I'm sorry, is that cheese on it?" and kind of, like that. So there has been a lot of situations on the road where I have had to eat salad with, like, corn. You know, a regular green salad. So I've been quite hungry. (Interview 2 2020)*

This example indicates a contrast between the informants everyday social context and what happens when she is travelling and finds herself in new situations. Being vegan can be hard when there is no food prepared for her. A norm around eating animal products is

reflected in this quote and the informant has to orientate herself in relation to that, even if she chooses a different path. As highlighted through these examples, food can both be a tool for inclusion and exclusion and what is considered to be normal or legitimate can vary from one social context to another. When moving to a new country or travelling, situations may occur when we do not feel orientated and when we have to navigate in relation to new circumstances. What is considered legitimate and good taste (Bourdieu 1984) in certain sociocultural contexts shape the landscape that food consumers need to navigate. A feeling of disorientation can occur when we find ourselves in a new social situation and we become aware that our choices, in this case a dietary choice, differ from the direction we are given and expected to follow (Ahmed 2006:20-21). In this case, that direction is the norm around eating animal products, but direction can also be a matter of social and cultural differences such as traditions, social class, gender or national identity. One of my informants who moved from Japan to Sweden explains:

*It is important to learn, I think, when you are international. You have to adjust the table, so I make a lot of Swedish food. (Interview 6 2020)*

In this case, the informant sees it as her responsibility to adjust her cooking to the circumstances. Food becomes a tool to navigate a new social context, and by following expected directions around how to eat when you live in Sweden, she can become orientated and feel at home in a new social space (Ahmed 2006). This quote indicates that food is a social and cultural issue, as it is not just a matter of surviving, but a way of living and a tool in the process of adapting to a new culture; something that can create a sense of aim and direction. Adjusting the way we cook and eat to the idea of what good taste is in a certain social context can be a way to gain social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). Here, such social context is a national one and the informant reflects upon a will to take part in Swedish culture through adjusting her cooking. Cooking certain types of food and serving meals in a way that is considered legitimate in the cultural context she is in, is a way to take part in said culture and in doing so increasing her cultural capital.

As previously discussed, eating together and sharing a meal relates to issues around identity, community and belonging, and can influence social and cultural capital. One of my informants reflects upon different situations where he shares a meal with other people and the difference between these situations:



*For example, me and my mother spend a lot of time together, and a lot of the time we spend together is around food. I usually come over to her place, I check out a recipe and say: 'Should we eat this?' and then she pays and I cook the food. And then we're both happy and it's nice. (Interview 5 2020)*

He also says:

*I mean, it's a totally different thing I think, but I eat with people at lunch at work. But we don't eat the same thing, and not exactly at the same time, but approximately. But it still feels like... I think it has something in common as a meeting point where everyone eats and then you do it at the same time in the same room. And you take it slow and talk about other things, kind of. It's kind of the same as when me and my mom cook. But it's not... Foodwise, it's not the same at all, but as a ritual or, what to say, routine, it is. (Ibid)*

These reflections show that there are both similarities and differences among various social contexts when it comes to sharing a meal. In one way, the work situation is different, as they are not in fact sharing a meal and eating the same food at the same time. However, they are sharing an experience of eating together and having a break during their work day. As such, the meal is not just the food itself, but the social context. It can be a ritual, a routine and a way to build relationships no matter if it is in a private or professional context. It is a way of becoming orientated in relation to other people, in a social environment and in our relationships with others.

Both these examples highlight the importance of coming together and sharing a meal, but the situation with the mother is strongly connected to the eating experience. Deciding what to eat, shopping for it, cooking and sharing the meal is a social activity that strengthens their relationship. The situation at work is a social event where food consumption is central, but the informant does not have to negotiate what to eat in relation to others. In the next section, the social landscape of food consumption will be studied further by analysing the negotiation of when, what and how to eat.

### 5.3 Negotiating the when, what and how of a meal

As previously discussed, how and what we eat can vary depending on our social context. We are negotiating our identities and navigating food-consumption choices in relation to other people, situations and circumstances. By understanding how social contexts

shape consumption patterns, we can deepen the understanding around how and why people eat what they do. This section will address how social contexts can influence when, what and how we eat. One of my informants who lives alone, but has a partner who lives in another country, explains:

*I have very irregular eating habits. I usually don't eat breakfast. I drink coffee in the morning, with a lot of oat milk. I eat kefir, yoghurt, if I feel a little bit hungry. But I usually don't like morning food. Unless I travel. If I travel and stay somewhere, then I love to have breakfast served and I can eat as much as possible. But at home, I rarely make breakfast. But when my partner, he lives in England, comes here, then we eat breakfast. And then it's eggs. I love eggs.*  
(Interview 7 2020)

This can be understood as a negotiation where different factors changes the way the informant eats. First, she says that she usually does not eat breakfast, but she also says that she does when she travels and when her partner comes to visit. She also talks about how she drinks coffee and eats a bit of yoghurt if she has breakfast when she is alone, but eats eggs, that she loves, when her partner is visiting. She is both negotiating if to eat at all and what to eat depending on the circumstances and the company. By deciding if and what to eat, she is navigating social spaces such as eating with her partner or travelling, and doing so can give a feeling of orientation and finding her place in her social surroundings (Ahmed 2006). The decision of what she should eat is not just a matter of what she as an individual prefers, but something that happens in a social context. Food consumption becomes a social event, influenced by different contexts and people.

In addition to negotiating what and how to eat in relation to other people and contexts, we also negotiate when certain meals should be consumed. One of my informants says: "First of all, I'm the kind of person who never eats breakfast. I eat my first meal at 11, the earliest." (Interview 1 2019) But, she also explains that, when she was growing up, "we always had breakfast together as a family" (Ibid). This example provides us with insights on how food is not just a matter of individual choices, but a social event where people are expected to follow certain directions. Even when the informant decides not to eat breakfast and considers herself to be a person who does not do that, she is navigating the social landscape of food consumption. The meal becomes a situation where she negotiates her identity in relation to her family. Her quote reflects upon a norm around eating breakfast, or consuming the first

meal of the day before 11, that she is aware of and orientates herself in relation to, even when she does not eat breakfast. When they ate together as a family, she had to compromise, negotiate and eat in a way that she would not have chosen herself.

How, what and when we eat may vary from one social situation to another and it is an ongoing process of becoming orientated and negotiating identities in relation to other people. By having breakfast together with her family the informant navigated that specific social context and found a way to become orientated and feel at home. However, now that she is a adult living alone, her eating habits are different. Her identity as "the kind of person who never eats breakfast" (Interview 1 2019) had to be negotiated in a situation where she was expected to eat breakfast together with her family.

Another informant lives with a couple of friends, but usually plans his own meals. He says:

*It's kind of like, I like to eat and I would like to, when I meet others and eat with my mom and we eat at a restaurant and that kind of stuff. But you know... when I'm just at home working it would have been nice to not have to stop and eat and just be able to... have shakes or something. (Interview 3 2020)*

In this case, the social context is important for the informant to stop and eat at all. The relationship with his mom and others plays an important role for him, as he likes to eat when they are around, but he would like to be able to choose not to stop for food when alone and working. The company of others plays an important role as he finds a way in his identity as someone who likes to eat. As reflected upon in the examples above, sharing meals with others influences our food-consumption habits. Meals are situations where we build and maintain social relationships, gain capital and negotiate our identity. Food influences our relationships with others and our relationships with others shape the choices we make as food consumers. It is an ongoing process of creating value and meaning while navigating a social space. In addition to negotiating when a meal should be consumed in relation to others, the informants also negotiate how a meal should be prepared and consumed when dining together. One informant, who is a single mother with shared custody, explains:

*When I'm alone, that week I rarely cook for myself. But the week my child is here, I cook almost every day. We may take something from the freezer some day. Or go out to eat sometime. But when I'm home alone then it's maybe a sandwich or an apple. (Interview 1 2019)*

This quote indicates that there is difference between the informants eating habits when she is alone and when her son is at home. She navigates these two situations differently and adjust her habits to whether or not she is eating together with her child. However, the adjustments are not just about the cooking, but also about the serving of the meal. She explains further:

*And then there's dinners that we eat together, me and my son, and then I usually have at least four different vegetables separated in bowls as children don't like it mixed. But it's quite easy to get him to eat vegetables if he can serve himself. And then we have it like that with all the components of the meal, that it's in separate bowls. So it can be pasta in one bowl, sauce in one bowl, meatballs in one bowl and an assortment of vegetables. (Interview 1 2019)*

The informant has come to the conclusion that she needs to separate the food in different bowls for her son to eat vegetables. By making adjustments, she finds a sense of direction and navigates the social situation of eating with her child that does not like mixed food. However, as she is adjusting her habits to her child's wants and needs, she is also making choices in relation to the expectation that children should eat vegetables and that the parent should create circumstances for this to happen. Her choices are both influenced by the dining situation with her son and by norms and expectations in society. Reflections of norms are present in our food choices whether it is an expectation that we should eat fruits, that we should eat breakfast or that children should eat their vegetables. While navigating the social landscape of food consumption, we are simultaneously orientating ourselves in relation to everyday social events and what is considered legitimate in society at large.

As previously discussed, meal situations and relationships can influence how and when a meal is served. It can also have an impact on what a person decides to eat. The examples with the woman who lives alone, but has a partner in another country (Interview 7 2020), the woman who has moved from Japan to Sweden (Interview 6), the single mother and her son (Interview 1 2019) and the man who lives alone, but likes to eat with others (Interview 3 2020) gives us insights on how consumers navigate choices of food consumption in relation to other people. Eating alone or together with others can change how, when and what we eat. The meal as a social situation is an arena where identities are negotiated as we orientate ourselves and who we are in relation to people around us. When planning meals,

going grocery shopping, cooking or eating together, we make sense of who we are and our place in the world. Food is a tool that helps us become orientated in social contexts, whether it is about moving to a new country or having dinner with or without your child. One informant, who lives with her partner, explains:

*I eat more natural products. I can... if I compare to my partner at least, it's very clear that I can cook black lentils with some broth and rice and eat it with a sauce. But he doesn't eat any, like, raw lentils... Or just lentils in that way. And sometimes I can feel that I would like to eat, that we could eat more like that. You know, like 'Can't he just like some cooked lentils?'. (Interview 2 2020)*

As the informant and her partner have different ideas of what a good meal is, she negotiates and adjusts what she eats when they are planning meals and eating together. If she would have been eating alone, she would have chosen other types of food, but choosing a direction that relates to her partner's expectations as well creates a sense of orientation. What we eat is impacted both by everyday habits, such as planning and sharing meals with a partner, and through major changes in our lives. Such change can be moving to a new country. The informant who moved to Sweden from Japan and lives with her Swedish partner says:

*Food is really important. For example, if I want to stay here, I need to learn how to eat, to respect what he wants to eat. And when we go to Japan, he respects what I want to eat there. So, it's really important. (Interview 6 2020)*

The food consumption by this informant and her partner depends on what country they are in. When they are in Sweden, where they currently live, she respects that he wants to eat the food he is used to and she expects him to respect her wishes when they are in her home country. This highlights that food consumption can be influenced by a person's background, memories and habits, but there is still a negotiation with other people and situations. Consuming food that her partner likes when they are in Sweden and consuming food that she likes when they are in Japan can create a feeling of orientation and direction. This is also an example of how social and cultural capital can influence dietary choices, as what is considered legitimate and good food varies depending on the cultural context (Bourdieu 1984). In this case, that context is a national one, but it can also be a matter of

other social groups and eating communities. Through their relationship, both the informant and her partner gain the cultural capital needed to make what is considered to be good choices around food in the other persons home country.

These two examples highlight how food consumers negotiate social and cultural identities, what they eat and what is important to them both during major changes in their lives and through the habits of everyday life. This is an ongoing process where identity and belonging is negotiated and renegotiated in everyday life in relation to other people and norms in society. There are also social situations that do not occur on an everyday basis where dietary choices and food consumption habits are being negotiated, such as when someone is invited to a social event that involves food. One of the informants who is allergic to milk protein says:

*If there's no food I can eat, then I simply don't eat. Then I'll eat later. It's not the end of the world. (Interview 1 2019)*

This is a situation that could cause a feeling of disorientation, as there is nothing the informant can eat. However, she finds a sense of direction and orientates herself by making the choice of not eating in these situation and by claiming that "it's not the end of the world" (Ibid). Making a choice for herself gives her a clear direction that lets her feel at home (Ahmed 2006) even in unfamiliar situations, instead of feeling excluded by others when there is no food available for her. The situation she describes and how she relates to it can also be seen as an example of how capital influences food choices. While she is not able to eat what is served, since it contains milk, she has the cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1984) to handle the situations in a way where she can still feel included and at home.

As we navigate the social landscape of food consumption, we shape who we are and what it means to feel orientated in relation to people around us, such as partners, friends and family. One informant, who is vegan and who was a vegetarian before that, says:

*I think that I grew up with a lot of vegetables in my home. I lived close to Möllevångstorget in Malmö until I was 8 and we bought lots of fruit at the market. And it has always been a lot of strange stews and stuff. So I think that it has been possible to read out of my childhood that I would stop eating meat at some point. (Interview 3 2020)*

Here the informant reflects upon how his childhood has had an impact on his dietary choices later in life. Because of his upbringing and how it shaped his identity he now feels more at home in the identity of being a vegetarian or vegan. Choosing that direction has been easier for him and he feels more at home in that choice because of the food he ate growing up.

As reflected upon in previous examples and discussions, meal situations can be understood both as an arena where we continuously negotiate who we are in relation to others in everyday situations, such as when having dinner with partners and children or attending social events, and a factor that can shape more long-term choices such as change of diet. This will be further elaborated on in the following section where we delve deeper into the impact capital can have on eating habits and choices of food consumption.

#### 5.4 The impact of capital on eating habits

As previously discussed, the social landscapes of food consumption can be arenas where we negotiate our identities. Food can be a tool to build relationships and find our place in the world, but it can also be a reason for disorientation when we are faced with new situations and social contexts (Ahmed 2006). The way we navigate the social landscape of food consumption is also influenced by our level of social, economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). One of my informants says:

*We've been influenced by these trends and food patterns. In the past, when I came here, I didn't have to care about what type of food should I eat. But I think, my wife also has been reading a lot, she's into food, and she's picky. Like, you know, what kind of nutrient value does it have? Is it sustainable? And now we look into the quality of the meat, for example. I didn't care about the quality of the meat before. And now, for example, we only eat and buy Swedish meat. Because we think that Swedish meat is very trustable and trustworthy. There's not too much chemicals in it. So, when it comes to meat for example, we're very picky now. (Interview 4 2020)*

As the informant and his wife has increased their cultural capital through new knowledge around food, nutrition, sustainability and meat quality, they have made changes to their food-consumption patterns. Since they have read more and learned more, they have also changed their habits according to what they now believe to be legitimate. This demonstrates how good taste and capital can be reflected through perspectives such as health and

sustainability. The increase in capital can come from literature and education as well as through everyday interactions with others. He also says:

*I have some people who are very much concerned about what they eat in my workplace. For example, my office mate is a vegetarian and vegan. I have lately been very influenced by some of my friends. Cause we talk a lot about food as well when we eat at the table. (Ibid)*

This provides us with another example of how meals are arenas where capital is negotiated. As the informants says, he and his friends and colleagues talk a lot about food while eating and doing so influences his choices. The table and the meal as a social space plays a role in how he navigates the landscape of food consumption. Explaining that his colleagues are very concerned about what they eat can be understood as a situation where capital is transferred. He learns more about conscious food choices through the everyday event of sharing a meal, which increases his level of capital and makes it possible for him to make more conscious choices. Relating to Ahmed's perspectives, the adjustments we make in relation to what is seen as right in a social context can be a way of finding a sense of direction. What we eat and how gives us an opportunity to share ideals, create meaning and feel at home in a group (2006). Ethical and sustainability aspects of food consumption relate to capital, as our ability to make certain conscious choices can require different forms of capital. One informant says:

*If I am to eat meat, I want to cook it as well as possible. For it to be, kind of, worth it in some way. That someone has lost their life for it. And in the same way, I try not to eat meat, or maybe animal products at all, for nutrition or health, because I think I can get those things in other ways. But since it's important for me, that I appreciate when things taste good, I can do it for those reasons. And maybe sometimes also, I guess it can be, sometimes it can feel festive or so to... Like the thing that on New Year's Eve you should eat tenderloin or lobster. Or something like that. Or that when you eat scallops, I've also had that, me and my mom have had some kind of thing that then it's festive. Then you know that what you do is something special. (Interview 5 2020)*



Making ethical and conscious choices around animal products is not just a matter of being vegan or vegetarian, but is also reflected upon by the informants who do eat meat and other animal products. Even though this informant does consume meat, he is trying to make conscious decisions around when it is worth it or not. Ethics are present as he thinks about when it is worth to consume something that an animal had to give up their life for. Reflecting upon these choices and traditions around what is festive brings up questions around sustainability and ethics, as well as traditions and social values. This provides us with an example of how we are often navigating among several different norms at one time that are pointing us in different directions. On the one hand, he tries to relate to the norm around meat consumption and that it should be consumed especially at certain occasions such as New Year's Eve, and on the other, he aims to make conscious choices and tries to decide when it is worth it or not. He also brings up health and nutrition, and even though he does not view that as the main issue when it comes to meat consumption, it is still a part of his awareness and something he has to orientate himself in relation to. This demonstrates how complex food choices can be and that there may not always be one simple answer. Even when aiming to make ethical choices, we are pointed in several different directions and our ability to choose consciously what to eat depends on our levels of capital. Being aware and having knowledge of how meat is produced, how to cook and eat it is one example of cultural capital in relation to food consumption. The same informant further explains:

*I have a new friend that I haven't spent that much time with before, it feels like we have kind of found each other because we both enjoy good food. And I have kind of been looking for someone to like, go out and eat good food with. Because otherwise, it's like, if you're going to go to a more expensive restaurant you need to bring someone who is willing to spend some money. So we have done that once so far. And eaten at home one time. (Ibid)*

This highlights both an economic, as well as cultural and social, aspect. To share the interest of going to a more expensive restaurant, the person needs to have the economic capital to afford it, but also the cultural capital to appreciate it and want to spend the money. It is, therefore, not just a matter of money, but a matter of being able to understand what is viewed as good taste and good food in a certain context (Bourdieu 1984). By sharing an idea of what good food is, people can come together and build relationships around their interest in food. One can have either economic or cultural capital, or both, and it has the potential to

transform socially. Having money cannot buy you cultural capital in terms of language that determines what good food is, but it can give you access to certain social contexts where cultural capital can be gained (Bourdieu 1984). This is also relevant for ethics and sustainability as our social context and level of capital has an impact on our ability to make conscious choices, such as a vegan diet or deciding when or how to eat meat. By having access to certain social contexts, food consumers can gain the cultural capital, such as new information and knowledge, to make more conscious choices. As reflected upon in the previous example with the young man who grew up with a lot of vegetables at home who is now a vegan (Interview 3 2020), capital can not only influence separate dining situations, but overall dietary choices. What is considered good and legitimate taste can also be a matter of what is considered to be legitimate from an ethical point of view in a specific social context.

Economic capital can work together with social and cultural capital both as a tool for exclusion and inclusion. The material indicates that economic capital matters as the informants seem to value it differently. For example, one informant mentions her food costs at the very beginning of our interview (Interview 6 2020), while another reflects upon it at the end of our interview after mentioning factors such as taste and ethical production (Interview 5 2020). By addressing this, we can become aware of the factors at play when consumers decide what to eat and how these different factors are prioritised. Being able to choose freely what to eat and make what is considered to be conscious choices is influenced by economic capital as not everyone can afford to buy and eat anything they want. It is important to be aware that economic capital, and social and cultural capital for that matter, has an impact on a person's access to certain food-consumption choices.

Capital also impacts how we buy and take care of food. Requiring new knowledge about how to navigate between different choices in the grocery store or new ways of preparing, cooking and taking care of produce increases our cultural capital and influences our food habits. For example, one informant mentions television as a source of information, saying:

*The food in Japan is quite expensive, but there are TV shows with ideas on how to use, and reuse, instead of throwing away. So I like to watch stuff like that. (Interview 6 2020)*

We can possess new capital both through social situations with friends and family and sources such as television and other media. This example highlights how television

programmes can be a source of knowledge on how to reduce food waste, which gives the informant an increased level of cultural capital that helps her orientate herself as a conscious consumer. This can also be transformed into economical capital, as this knowledge makes it possible for her to waste less food. Capital can be understood as something that is constantly being reproduced and transferred through the events of everyday life. Definitions of taste are constantly changing in relation to the experiences we gain through cultural contexts (Burstedt 2018:148). We continuously renegotiate our positions and directions as consumers when our levels of capital and view of what good taste is change over time. The following section will further elaborate on the ever-changing landscape of food consumption and how consumers orientate themselves in relation to different choices.

### 5.5 Becoming orientated in the landscape of food consumption

As food is produced in many different places and in a variety of ways, food consumers are not just orientating themselves in relation to a local environment, but also in relation to a globalised world. Yet, no matter if food is produced locally or globally, it is consumed locally in a specific social context (Crowther 2013:12). This means that individuals need to orientate themselves and navigate among several choices when deciding what food to consume. As we can see in previous examples from the material, what is considered ethical and sustainable is constantly being renegotiated as we are presented with new choices and information on an everyday basis, and the decisions are often placed on the individual consumer. Food consumers orientate themselves not just in relation to the social context in which the food is consumed, but in the global context in which the food is produced. As a large responsibility is placed on consumers today, individuals need to make the best possible choices with their current level of capital. As one informant explains:

*I think it's mostly a trust issue. Swedish meat, for example, I believe is very transparent in the process of production, what kind of preservatives, additives or ingredients are combined to make that product. So, I believe that that whole thing... I put a lot of trust in that. (Interview 4 2020)*

This example indicates that food is not just a simple everyday habit, but a phenomenon connected to choices that has an impact on our world. The informant is aware of where the meat comes from and reflects upon issues such as preservatives and additives. Trust is mentioned as an important factor when choosing what to buy and eat. This quote also reflects how one individual consumer has to be informed and make conscious choices, as he

needs to choose what he believes in and put his trust in that. It is not just a matter of deciding what to eat for dinner, it is also about choosing the ingredients for that meal from all the available choices. One informant says:

*It also matters if it's sustainable and ethical. Or I think, sustainable from an environment and climate perspective is more like a general thing. Like I was talking about with the budget. That I can think in general that I want to eat like this and that, but it's not something that I think about that much from one meal to another — 'I should make this meal sustainable and ethical'. But... more generally. More in the store than when I cook the food. (Interview 5 2020)*

Here, the consciousness and values around sustainability have been integrated in the informant's behaviour. It is something he is aware of and it influences his choices, but it is not something he actively thinks about in every situation. It has become normalised and is a part of what he just does in his everyday life. His current position and possession of capital makes it possible for him to find a direction and make choices from an environmental and climate perspective without reflecting upon it on an everyday basis. He does however mention that he is more aware of it in the store than he is when cooking the food, which comes up in several interviews. The store, and buying groceries, seems to be a place and situation that can create a feeling of disorientation. One informant, a young woman who is vegan, says:

*It's just too bad that the lentils I buy, even though they are organic and fair trade and everything, are still from India, or that I don't even know where they're from. I have noticed that, sometimes, I haven't even looked at the products I've bought. I have just thought, ah organic, that's great. Without... Because I know that, with tomatoes for example. I have understood that growing tomatoes requires a lot of water, and that it takes a lot of energy to grow tomatoes even here in Sweden. So maybe it's not eco friendly anyway. But it feels better to buy Swedish tomatoes that are grown 20 kilometres away, non-organic then, than buying organic ones from Spain that has been transported. And then I read that some organic stuff isn't good, that it doesn't have to be good just because it's organic, and then I go like 'okay?'. So, I'm fed with all this stuff, and I've just felt like, is it organic then I trust that, and*

*preferably fair trade, and KRAV, so as many labels as possible makes it feel good, or something, but I don't really know why, it's more that I trust that it's some kind of quality mark. (Interview 2 2020)*

KRAV, one of the labels being mentioned here, is a certification for food produced without unnatural chemical pesticides, with consideration for animal welfare, with less environmental impact, with more biodiversity and under better working conditions (KRAV 2021). Here, it is mentioned among other labels and certifications such as organic and fair trade, which is international certification concerning social, economic and environmental requirements (Fairtrade 2021). This quote is an example of how it can be hard for food consumers to make choices, as they are pointed in several different directions. There seems to be an endless amount of choices that the informants have to navigate when buying food and these choices are sometimes conflicting, such as deciding between imported organic produce or non-organic local produce. Even though she aims to make conscious choices and buy food in line with what is considered legitimate from a sustainability perspective, there is not one right answer to what to buy.

As a consumer, the informant needs to orientate herself in the social landscape of food choices influenced by her current possession of capital. Making one statement of food preference, by being a vegan, does not mean that she is not considering other factors of food production. The focus on trust that has been mentioned previously, as well, says something about our food culture today, as it reflects upon the major responsibility that is placed on individual consumers when they have to choose what labels to trust to be able to navigate the social landscape of food consumption. For one consumer that can mean choosing Swedish meat (Interview 4 2020) and for another that can mean buying products with labels such as KRAV or fair trade (Interview 2 2020). Consumers are pointed in a number of different directions simultaneously when choosing between options such as vegan, organic, fair trade and local. When researching and working with consumer behaviours, we need to take this into consideration and ask: Who can make certain decisions and why? What level of capital is needed to buy a certain product? For example, one informant brings up the economic aspect as her main guideline when buying food (Interview 6 2020), while other informants bring up taste (Interview 5 2020), ethical aspects (Interview 2 2020 & Interview 3 2020) and trust (Interview 4 2020 & Interview 2 2020). If we are to understand consumer behaviour, we need to address this complexity.

Here, our own reflexivity can play an important role to make the invisible visible. To take myself as an example, going to the grocery store can be really stressful. Even though I aim to make conscious choices based on my current knowledge, I have found it hard to know what is right. Add to this that food is something that we consume on an everyday basis and that we may not have the time to keep up with new information and insights. When consuming something that you buy once in your life or once every 10 years, you may be able to research and compare different options, but with food, I have experienced a lot of stress and confusion when trying to make the right choices, as there always seems to be something more to learn. Being a Swedish woman from an upper-middle-class background living in Lund, where I would say that there is easy access to a variety of sustainable choices like organic and local, I still find it hard to orientate myself as a consumer when I am pointed in several different directions. With that insight, I am aware that it can be even harder for people who do not possess the same level of capital as I do to make conscious choices. Aiming to understand the complexity of reasons why people do or do not make certain choices is crucial to finding solutions in areas such as sustainability, public health and marketing. This will be discussed further in the following chapter.

## 6 Discussion and applicability

This study indicates that there is a reason to study the social and cultural aspects of food as they have an impact on food consumers' choices. Not to give an answer or explanation to what good food is or what it means to people, but to address how the sociocultural landscape of food consumption impacts consumers choices and the directions they are pointed to. Ahmed's (2006) and Bourdieu's (1984) theoretical tools and perspectives have been applied to analyse how food consumers navigate between different choices of what, when and how to eat, influenced by their social context and level of capital. The material provides insights to how food consumers negotiate their choices in relation to friends, family and colleagues in everyday social contexts (Interview 1 2019, Interview 2 2020, Interview 3 2020, Interview 4 2020, Interview 5 2020, Interview 6 2020, Interview 7 2020). Through my material, I would like to argue that food consumers' choices are not just based on information, but are also influenced by sociocultural factors such as capital, identity, belonging, relationships, values and meanings. This study indicates that food consumers change their eating habits over time, through social situations and as they increase their levels of capital. Aiming to understand why people may or may not choose different types of ingredients, meals or diets can be of importance in areas such as public health, sustainability and marketing, and the themes and findings from this study can be developed further in future work.

This study highlights consumers' experiences of navigating the sociocultural landscape of food consumption and provides examples of factors that influence eating habits and dietary choices. It indicates that, even when food consumers aim to make conscious choices, there is a variety of options for them to navigate based on their current level of capital (Interview 2 2020, Interview 4 2020, Interview 5 2020), which can create a feeling of disorientation. The examples in this study provides insights to how food consumers choices are influenced by other people, such as friends and colleagues, social situations, norms, new information and media such as television shows. The themes and findings from this study can be developed further as tools for professionals involved in behavioural change. The cultural analytical perspective adds a deeper understanding of the complexity of factors that influences dietary choices. As this material indicates, a single person can have several ways of eating depending on social situations and a variety of perspectives are taken into consideration when navigating what to buy and eat, both alone and with others. By analysing

food and dietary choices as a cultural phenomenon, we can understand the complexity of consumer behaviours and how to work with these.

As seen in previous studies and as discussed in this thesis, a cultural analytical perspective can contribute to the understanding of how value is created in relation to food consumption and how it relates to other issues in society. A continuous documentation and analysis of food culture can be an important key to understanding everyday life, local identity, trends within the experience consumption area and social life (Pétursson, Lindqvist. & Österlund-Pötzsch. Red. 2018:7). This perspective can be an important tool for organisations working within areas of public health, sustainability and marketing. Understanding the challenges consumers face and how the social landscape of food consumption influences their choices can provide us with insights and tools for how to work with these issues. This study builds on previous research to address both the benefits of qualitative methods and how an understanding of sociocultural contexts is of importance to address the complexity of food consumption. Understanding food consumption as a sociocultural matter and analysing it from a cultural analytical perspective can provide an important framework for development of strategies, products and projects (Sunderland & Denny 2007:57). Being aware of the aspects of food consumption that have been presented in this study can help authorities, organisations, researchers and professionals working within the area of food consumption create a deeper understanding around why people do what they do and how culture is reproduced in everyday life.

## 6.1 Public health

As Mine Sulow argues, a cultural analytical perspective on food can be an important and constructive tool to work with public health issues. Even though the focus for her research is children and adolescents (2008), the overall issue is demonstrated in this study as well. The findings here show that consumers do not just make choices around food based on information and knowledge when it comes to topics such as health, but as a part of a social context. The choices they make relate to other people, habits and meanings, and the social aspect of food plays an important role in influencing food choices. This study indicates that consumers adjust their food consumption to their social surroundings, both in specific situations and over time by eating what others like to eat and by changing diets. If we are to understand food and health, we must also see food not just a matter of nutrients and physical health aspects, but a way of creating meaning, negotiating identities, building relationships and feeling at home in social contexts. By understanding deeper sociocultural meanings of



what and how we eat, and how food functions as a tool for social interaction, we can develop tools to work with issues related to individual and public health.

This study indicates that, while consumers may be aware of health aspects of food, there are other factors that influence their choices. Health was mentioned during the interviews for this study, but it was not seen as the main factor influencing the informants' food choices. For example, taste (Interview 5 2020 & Interview 7 2020) and community (Interview 1 2019) were highlighted as more important. If we want to understand how to achieve public health, we must also place it in relation to values around taste, community, identity and sustainability. The material indicates that food consumers are open to negotiating and adjusting what they eat in relation to others and that insight can be of importance when working with behavioural change in relation to food. Through my material, I would like to argue that, if we can make people feel that they can maintain their identities, social community and values and still achieve health, there is probably a greater chance at success.

Ahmed's theoretical perspectives can help us gain insights to public health by studying how bodies unfold in a social space and how food consumers navigate between different choices in relation to other people. If we are to make consumers choose options that are better for their health, we need to support them in becoming orientated and feeling at home with those options (Ahmed 2006). This can be done through an understanding of the social dynamics at play when consumers make choices around both everyday meals and long-term diets. Through the material in this thesis, we can understand that food consumers' relationships with others and how they relate to social contexts can play an important role when aiming to change lifestyle choices.

Bourdieu's theoretical tools can help us understand food from a public health perspective by studying how possession of capital influences consumers' ability to choose healthier options (1984). These perspectives are important, as norms and ideals around health are also social constructs that change over time, and the ability to make choices that are considered to be healthy depend on consumers positions, identities and their possession of capital. This opens up for a dialogue around how accessibility to certain choices creates division when some people can choose healthy products while others can not. We as researchers and professionals need to be aware of our own positions and how they affect what we see. If we overlook how capital and social positions influence what and how consumers eat, we will miss out on important insights and tools for behavioural change.

## 6.2 Sustainability

Being aware of the sociocultural aspects of food consumption is also relevant when addressing the complex issue of sustainability. As food consumption and dietary choices are negotiated in a social context, understanding these processes can contribute to behavioural change when it comes to sustainability. Who has access to the capital needed to make conscious choices in relation to sustainability and ethics? How can we make consumers feel like they can be who they are and feel orientated while making sustainable choices? Understanding the sociocultural aspects of food consumption through the concepts of orientation (Ahmed 2006) and capital (Bourdieu 1984) can contribute to sustainability both as a tool and as a part of the goal, as it takes inclusivity and social sustainability into consideration.

As this study shows, there is a variety of factors that can influence dietary choices, and even the consumer who aims for sustainable consumption can find it difficult to navigate among all the available options. The findings also show that, even when consumers aim to make sustainable choices, they are also negotiating their identities, who they are and where they belong in relation to family, partners, social contexts and societal norms. They are navigating the social space of meals and everyday eating habits, as well as the cultural landscape of food consumption and choices they need to make as individual consumers. Taking these aspects into consideration and aiming to understand why consumers do what they do has the potential to contribute to long-term change for sustainability. The insights from this study on how people are influenced to make more sustainable food choices and obstacles they experience can be developed both in further research and professional work by authorities and organisations.

## 6.3 Marketing

As this study shows, food consumption is a complex issue and consumers' choices are influenced by a variety of factors simultaneously. Nardo et al. argue that there is a need to make businesses more responsive to consumer needs and to simplify information (2013:273). This study also highlights a discrepancy between the responsibility placed on consumers and the level of empowerment they feel in making decisions. However, while there is a need to meet consumer needs and simplify information, the findings of this study also indicate that there is a need to understand the complexity of cultural processes that impact food-consumption behaviours. For example, the material highlights the importance of trust, national and cultural identity and the role social contexts play in consumer behaviour. As

seen here, food has a deeper cultural and symbolic meaning as consumers try to find their place in the world and being a part of a social context. Even when aiming to make conscious decisions around food consumption, the informants are navigating among a variety of diets, products, labels and ways of production. The material indicates that it can be hard to know what choices to make and what labels to trust. While doing so, they are also negotiating their identities and meal habits in relation to others. If our aim is to understand consumers, we need to treat issues around consumption in general as the complex issues they are and be aware of the roles we as professionals play in that process. A qualitative approach and cultural analysis can help us understand the different reasons why consumers choose to buy what they do influenced by their sociocultural backgrounds and current level of capital (Bourdieu 1984). Who has access to certain knowledge and social codes around food and how does that knowledge influence consumers' choices? How can we meet consumer needs by being aware of the role capital plays in the way consumers navigate the landscape of food consumption?

The trust issue has been a repeated theme in the material for this thesis and it gives an indication on the landscape of food consumption today. Even for conscious consumers, it can be hard to detect what companies and products to trust, as it takes capital to navigate between available options. As previously discussed, who we eat with has an impact on what we eat and our ideas of what good food is can change over time as we are faced with new knowledge and capital. Taking this into consideration can contribute to a more ethical approach to marketing that takes power structures and privileges into consideration. The findings presented here and in several prior studies show how marketing practices can benefit from a cultural analytical understanding of the complexity food consumption.

## 7 Conclusions

### 7.1 Main findings

This study highlights the sociocultural context of food consumption and how it influences eating habits and dietary choices. The material and analysis demonstrate that meals as social contexts can have an impact on what, when and how people choose to eat. The informants shared different perspectives on food and eating habits, but there are recurring themes that highlights the sociocultural meaning of food and how it impacts food-consumption choices.

The material indicated that the informants adjust what they eat both in relation to everyday food habits such as shared meals with partners and family, at social events such as parties and over time through dietary changes. The findings show examples of situations where identity is negotiated in relation to others such as eating breakfast when with others but not when alone (Interview 1 2019 & Interview 7 2020), separating ingredients when eating with children (Interview 1 2019), not eating when certain types of food are not available (Interview 1 2019 & Interview 2 2020) and cooking and eating special meals together with friends and family (Interview 5 2020). The findings also highlight that social situations such as living in a corridor (Interview 4 2020), living with others (Interview 3 2020) and discussing food around the table with friends and family (Interview 4 2020) can influence dietary choices and what products food consumers choose to buy. The examples provided in this study indicate that food consumers navigate factors such as cultural and national identity, belonging and relationships in relation to food. Food is understood here not just as an object, but a carrier of symbolic meaning and a central part of social and cultural practices.

This study finds that cultural, social and economic capital and feeling at home influences dietary choices and food consumption. It indicates that social contexts can have both short- and long-term impact on food-consumption choices and diets. The material reflects how the informants' food-consumption habits have been renegotiated and changed over time through various social situations and with new capital. Through this perspective, meals can be seen as an arena where capital is being transferred, identities are being negotiated and where food consumption is simultaneously impacting and being influenced by the cultural and social surroundings in which it takes place.

## 7.2 Concluding reflections

When studying a topic as complex as food, it is almost inevitable to be left with the feeling of having more to say. There will always be new layers and perspectives to what food is and what it can mean to people and cultural processes. This study has elaborated on themes related to the sociocultural aspects of food, meals, diets and eating habits, but it has also addressed that complexity. In one way, raising awareness of that complexity can be seen as a finding, as well. As many are trying to narrow down aspects of food into categories to make sense of food choices, what is done here is actually quite the opposite. Instead of aiming to avoid the complexity, it is given full focus. It is acknowledged that food as a cultural phenomenon is just as complex and ever changing as culture is. By understanding food from this perspective, we have a chance to address challenges related to food and culture with more awareness and curiosity. It is not just the nutrients or ingredients that makes a meal. It is just as much a matter of cultural values, processes and perspectives.

## 7.3 Indications of further research needs

Food is a complex and ever changing subject and there will always be a need for further research in this area. As discussed, a cultural analytical perspective can provide important insights to food as a social phenomenon and how dietary choices are influenced by our relationships with others, identity and sociocultural meaning. One suggestion for further research is to combine different perspectives and disciplines when working with complex issues such as food and sustainability or public health. By addressing these issues from multiple angles there is a chance to provide more nuanced perspectives and solutions.

In further studies the insights from this thesis could be developed to delve deeper into how consumers relate to sustainability issues in their consumption patterns and dietary choices. There could also be great value in researching the connection between capital and different types of individual consumption further and addressing different ways people of younger generations are influenced by the digital world and social media when it comes to eating habits. Nardo et al. estimates that consumers who are using the internet are 12% more empowered than others (2013) and a cultural analytic approach could contribute with one perspective on the subject.

The findings in this study could be further developed and researched by adding observations and aiming to understand how capital influences the way consumers navigate dining situations and food consumption. Conducting observations or go-along interviews in situations such as going to the grocery store, cooking and consuming everyday meals,

preparing for parties or lunch times at work could provide valuable perspectives on how consumers relate to food that may not have been reflected in this material. Doing so could add another layer to the insights of how power structures and meanings are reflected in everyday life. As food is a complex topic, there are always new reasons to study it as our culture, ideals and eating habits change.

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## 8.2 Field work

Field notes. Written by Tess Waltenburg.

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