

A Journey into Almere's Diverse Diet

Internship Report

Qurat Ul Ain

Master Food Systems Innovation
Aeres University of Applied Sciences

Supervisor Internship: Dr. Esther Veen

Lectorate: Urban Food Issues



Introduction

There is a strong relation between food and identity. Especially when people move to another country, traditional food (or simply food from their country of origin), symbolizes a link with culture, community and ethnic identity. As people move around the globe they introduce new foods in the places they land. Almere is becoming one of the largest majority minority cities of the Netherlands. Walking around the city, the diversity of food ingredients and eating cultures as shown in shops and restaurants is immediately clear. The aim of this project was to get an insight into the diets of the residents of Almere so as to learn about eating patterns in a multicultural city and how multiculturalism affects the diets of both newcomers and people who have been living here for generations.



Methods

Online survey

We used an online survey to get a better picture of what the people of Almere are eating and how diverse their food choices are. Questions centred around people's favorite ingredient to cook with, and the main reason for that.

We created two versions of the survey: one in Dutch and one in English, so as to target for a diverse population.

The survey was spread using different Facebook groups and personal contacts. There were 39 responses (15 English, 24 Dutch).

Market Research

We visited the open market physically and asked people for their favorite ingredients. In short conversations and by taking photos we documented the ingredients they enjoy cooking.

We acknowledge that the language of the survey people chose to fill out does not say much about whether or not people are Dutch. We assume, however, that people who answered the survey in Dutch have been living in the Netherlands for quite some time - enough to understand Dutch. We also assume that people who filled out the English survey are relatively new to the Netherlands.

Literature review

Literature was used to study the ingredients photographed at the market. We looked into the backgrounds of these ingredients, where they originally came from and how they have travelled around the world.

We also used literature to determine how and why some ingredients stand out in some cultures, and to try and understand the significance of cuisine in culture.

Some interesting survey results

Health

The word 'health' appears quite a few times in the Dutch answers. This gives the impression that people are taking health into account while preparing food or are generally more aware about (or interested in) healthy food than people who filled out the English survey: these people do not mention health or healthy food at all.

Meat versus veggies

The English respondents liked meat more, while the Dutch survey population preferred vegetables. This can imply that non-Dutch respondents consider meat more valuable than any other food item while the people who have been living in the Netherlands for a longer period of time more often chose a vegetable as a favorite ingredient.

Family versus culture

In one of the questions we asked about special memories people have about the ingredient they chose. In their answers respondents of the English survey often talked about traditions related to their culture. This implies that the food helps them stay connected to their roots. Dutch respondents often reminisced about old times with family.



More interesting survey results

Stews versus pasta: time

People who filled out the English survey mentioned a lot of curries and stews as favorite meals. These were hardly mentioned by Dutch respondents. Both stews and curries are slow cooked gravy dishes and take a lot of time to prepare.

In contrast, in the Dutch survey pasta was often quoted as a favorite ingredient - even more often than any other dish in both surveys combined. Dutch people like pasta because it's easy to cook: it is versatile, convenient, stores well, is easily available and, most importantly, saves a lot of time. The findings suggest that respondents filling out the Dutch survey prefer to spend little time on cooking.

Spicy versus seasoned

The English respondents particularly enjoy spicy food: several of them mentioned spices as their favourite ingredient: e.g paprika, pepper, red chilli. Also, most of the dishes they mentioned were savoury. In contrast, favorite foods of the Dutch responses can be considered seasoned rather than spicy.

Availability

This survey indicates that acquiring diverse foods in Almere is not a problem: we asked the respondents if their favorite ingredient is easily available in Almere and every single person responded with 'yes'.



Ingredients bought at the market

Bread

In order to make bread one needs wheat. Wheat emerged from a region stretching from Syria to Kashmir in Asia and parts of Ethiopia. Traces reveal that around 3000 BC the Egyptians adopted and perfected the way of preparing bread from the Sumerians (people from Mesopotamia) and introduced the use of yeast in baking. They also built ovens to bake several breads at once.

After the 13th century northern Europeans needed to import cereals from other regions, due to a population surge. At the end of the 16th century, around 1.000 to 1.200 ships were sailing toward the Netherlands: half of those were loaded with cereals. After the introduction of cereals and the domestication of seeds, the production of wheat in the European region increased. In 1880 Europe succeeded in developing high quality seeds which resulted in making good quality breads.



Ingredients bought at the market



Cheese

First it was believed that the Romans were the ones to introduce cheesemaking in Europe. Later it was found that the cheesemaking culture in Central Europe started thousands of years before the Roman invasion, by the Neolithic migration of dairy farmers from Southeast Asia.

The modern era for the history of cheese is considered to be the 17th century, when European powers started to colonise the world. This changed the market forces and introduced cheese globally. It ultimately paved the way for industrial cheese making and cheese factories.

Ingredients bought at the market

Eggs

Nobody knows when and where the domestication of chickens occurred. Domestication of fowl eggs for consumption can be seen in China and Egypt around 1400 BC, but there is some evidence that it dates back to the Neolithic age.

The very first evidence of domesticated chickens in Europe (in various locations) is from 1200 to 550 BC, but the specific timing is not certain. With his second voyage in 1493 Columbus introduced the domesticated fowl to North America.



Ingredients bought at the market



Honey

The history of honey is very long. Although no accurate date is available, it is considered to be the oldest sweetener used by people. The earliest evidence of honey harvesting is depicted in a 10.000-year-old painting known as Arana or Spider Cave, in Eastern Spain. By 2400 BC beekeeping was very well established in Egypt: the product was considered a luxury.

In Europe honey was not widely consumed during medieval times according to evidence collected by historians. But over time beekeeping practices increased and honey became widely available, which helped in reducing the high price.

Ingredients bought at the market

Chestnut

Chestnuts serve as a staple food in countries like Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, China, Korea and Japan. As the chestnut tree has the ability to bear nuts regularly, ancient people relied on the tree for food.

In Europe chestnut cultivation improved drastically during the middle ages. Varieties that were produced most were those with a better quality of flour and long preservability.

The chestnut is now playing an important role in gastronomy. In modern day Italy around 15% of the wood surface consists of chestnut trees for wood and fruit.



Ingredients bought at the market



Red beans

For Asia, South America and some of the African regions, the red kidney bean is a valuable legume crop and it is produced quite extensively. Botanical evidence shows, however, that the bean originated in America. In 1506, the meso-American species of bean arrived in Europe through Spain and Portugal.

In Latin America and Eastern Europe the red bean is considered the major source of dietary protein.

Asparagus bean

The domestication of this bean is thought to have started in Ethiopia. Evidence shows that while originally China and India were also seen as early asparagus bean growing places, later studies ruled out these regions as primary centres because the wild relatives of the bean were restricted to Africa. According to the archaeological records of sub-Saharan Africa, the oldest known asparagus bean in the region comes from central Ghana.



Conclusions

When people move to another country they take their culture and traditions with them to the new destination: food is an important part of that culture.

Almere is a multicultural city, harboring people from different ethnic backgrounds. As the background stories to the chosen ingredients show, food has travelled the world for millenia. This makes it impossible to pinpoint where foods are 'from'. Nevertheless, the traditional foods that people associate with the cuisines from their home countries, remind them of these places, which is confirmed by our survey. For people who have been living in Almere for a longer period of time food memories are mostly connected to family occasions.

As people are looking to buy ingredients from different countries and cultures in Almere, the food environment of the city changes. Indeed, respondents stated that they had no trouble finding their favorite ingredients in Almere. Hence, the originally foreign ingredients are available to all of Almere's inhabitants, creating (opportunities for) more diverse diets for all.

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