

Hormel Foods - Our Food Journey™ Podcast
Episode 6 - The Anthropology of Food

Tanya Rodriguez: Food is one of the ways that I see people trying to build intimacy, trying to say, ok, you know, let's share things that break barriers, let's break bread together.

Ethan Watters: Welcome to Our Food Journey™, a podcast by Hormel Foods. I'm Ethan Waters. I'm a journalist who has spent the last couple of decades writing about psychology and culture, so I was very excited to get a chance to talk with Hormel's in-house anthropologist, Tanya Rodriguez. Buying, cooking, and sharing food can tell us a lot about who we are as a people. Tanya studies this world and it's one that is endlessly complex. There are thousands of food and cooking subcultures defined by place, history, and economics, and it's all constantly evolving and changing. I was curious to learn how Tanya tries to keep track of it all, and what trends she's currently watching. I hope you enjoy my conversation with Tanya Rodriguez. Tanya, thanks so much for joining us.

Tanya: Thanks, I'm glad to be here.

Ethan: So anthropologist for a food company—it's not the normal job you think of an anthropologist having. How did you get to this job and tell us a little more about it?

Tanya: Originally, my intent was to become a professor of anthropology. Specifically medical anthropology, looking at the integration of ethno-medicine in biomedicine and how consumers shop for health care in a contemporary sense, and then also looking at traditional types of healing. However, during my write-up, I saw a job description for Hormel, that they were looking for an anthropologist, a cultural anthropologist, to study how people choose food and that seemed very innovative to me. So I went ahead and applied, and lo and behold, an hour later, I got a job interview, and I was on my way to Austin, Minnesota.

Ethan: That's interesting. So how do you go about doing your work for Hormel? What do you do on a daily or weekly basis to gather your information?

Tanya: Well, at the beginning, it was kind of, ah, pioneering things because no one had been in the job in the one hundred twenty five year history of the company, so you're trying to figure out how exactly, does one do that for a large food manufacturer. So now, we've learned a lot in the years that I've been doing it, and so what we try to do is make sure that my boots are on the ground, I'm in the trenches with the consumer. So a lot of my job is traveling and going into consumers' homes. I cook with them, I shop with them, I find out how they meal plan, what they do, what's the spirit of their food. What is it that they're looking to get out of food just besides sustenance? So I find out a lot about those things through travel, but I also work really diligently and intimately with my team to help do ideations and prototype and so forth, to design new concepts for food—either redefine food that we have, refurbish it, so to speak, or to actually come up with new concepts for food.

Ethan: You ask someone, basically, like, can I come into your house? Can I go through your pantry? Can I watch you cook dinner? How do you do that and make that feel natural? Or is that, is that sort of the process? Like, I'm just going to come and stand in the corner of your kitchen and...

Tanya: That's interesting. I don't like to be a fly on the wall. Some people are anthropologists that like to be a fly on the wall and just kind of sit back and observe. I am very relational and so I really see it like making a new friend, and I'm starting to get cues about who they are from their neighborhood, from their home, from what they drive, what bumper stickers they have on their car. I'm downloading data right away about them and I'm using that to springboard a conversation with us.

So I never start talking about food right away. We start talking about hobbies, things they like, their family, and so forth. And then we start talking about food, and food inevitably leads to other stories, and leads to bigger pictures about what does food really help you do? Well, food helps me show love. Oh well, I really try to cook food quickly because really what I want to do is spend time, so you hear about the different dynamics and the different roles food plays because you hear about the larger story of what the consumer is trying to get at.

So my job is to facilitate, really, a friendship and sometimes it can even be so quick, you know. It's just ten minutes in a C store, right? But I see somebody searching, I see them looking for a snack and I'm watching them and I'm looking at what they put away and what they do take. And then I approach them. And then it's this really rich story about their whole thinking process, and they're like, wow I didn't even realize, you know, this is what I'm doing. But in just a few minutes, we can really build a relationship, because I have observed them and then kind of fed back their behavior, and they're like, ahh, yes, of course. So, really, I'm looking to make friendships

Ethan: That makes a lot of sense to me. Are families still eating dinners together? You hear trends, like families are so busy, you know, dual income households or single parents, does food still bring people together in the way it used to?

Tanya: I think it does, and it doesn't. So the idea of everyone sitting around at the table at the same time doesn't necessarily happen as much. Maybe with small children, families with small children, there's still that ability to control them and to, you know, get them into the same space at the same time. But as you see families with older kids that have activities, different things, it's a little bit more sparse. But what I will say is that there's a meal being cooked for everybody. And then people come together at a different time, sporadically, so maybe you're eating at the bar they're you know, talking to your mom while she's cooking and she's feeding you. And then your brother comes home from baseball and then he takes your place, and then dad and her eat, come and sit down together. So it's a table, but not necessarily the traditional table, but definitely the idea of bringing a family together around nourishment. You know, that idea of "I'm cooking for my family" still exists.

Ethan: So I'm fascinated with what you're learning about, the consumer trends out there, particularly how the value customer is thinking about their food. Are there trends in the value customer's life that you've noticed that surprise you?

Tanya: Well, I think the interesting trend is that people who do have means are mimicking the value customer. I really think that that's the interesting trend. We have tended to think that the value customer

wasn't interested in health, say. But they were doing a lot of from-scratch cooking because they couldn't afford a lot of the convenience items and so forth. So that's why we see a lot of the fresher foods, a lot of vegetables, because, yes, you know, they're needing to do the more economical, more carb based, starch based foods, but they're looking to brighten their foods with vegetables and so forth. And so you see a lot of one pot meals and things like that. More economical meals, meals that can be stretched. But now you see the people with means trying to mimic some of those dishes, because they're also looking for high flavor practical foods as well. And so I see them mimicking the value consumer in that way.

Ethan: They have been doing that for years. Say, for instance, the entire world of barbecue, which we think of as kind of a high-end food now, was about taking the cuts of meat no one else wanted and putting it through this process that made it totally delicious. So I think you could, probably, in any food tradition you can name from pasta to the use of rice. The value consumer in all those cultures have really driven what we think of as the fundamentals of that culture's cuisine, right?

Tanya: Absolutely, I think that they're really the kind of innovators and pollinators of food, so to speak. They bring all of these ideas to the table quite literally. And so what I love about them is, for instance, if you're looking at some more hispanic foods, like tripas, right? So tripas are entrails. People are making tacos that, this is really cheap and nobody wanted entrails, but several years ago, a lot of the food trucks got really interested in tripa tacos, but then it became very vogue and very hype, and so tripas went up on price quite a bit, and so then the normal people who knew how to cook them and had, you know, really invented the soul to these tacos couldn't afford them anymore. And we've seen the same thing with fajitas and other foods. But I think that the longevity of these foods, soul food, so to speak, really talks about the innovation and the kind of tenacious spirit of value consumer, not only with food, but with everything.

Ethan: It's innovation out of necessity, right? You're trying to find value in the food that you can buy.

Tanya: Right. What you can afford and then trying to foster all the taste you can muster out of that. What usually takes a lot of cooking, a lot of slow cooking again to make rough meat tender, and those types of things are to build flavors. And you know, that takes a lot of love. It takes a lot of time to do those things, so I really see them as being able to kind of cross function their food. They pull from everywhere and make something unique and delicious.

Ethan: You've cooked with a lot of families. How do you perceive the general skill level of people just in culture in general? Are people getting into cooking? Are they getting less skilled at cooking? Are we passing down those traditions in the way that we might have done in other generations, or are things getting lost?

Tanya: I think some things are getting lost person to person. So I do see people with basic cooking skills, but there's not a whole lot of people with really refined cooking skills, knife skills, or you know how to pair things and that type of thing. But that's the common person, right? We're just trying to make good food quickly and make sure that we nourish our families. But I do think there are a subset of people that are really getting into some fancy food. Like sous-vide cooking and other types of cooking, using cooking in a different way. So you see people using crock pots, different things, and really trying to innovate with cooking appliances. So I do see some of that happening as well.

I do want to mention, though, with gen z, because I think the younger generation coming up is very aware of food. What's in food, how it's produced, who's producing it, and I think they want more of an intimacy with food than generations before, and I think we're going to see them be quite different from millennials. Quite different from gen x in the way that they approach food. And I think that they may start to adopt more cooking skills, but I don't think it's, mom and grandma and that type of person teaching them. I think they try to find out a lot of things through media, and so they're getting education for cooking skills in that way, which I think is pretty avant garde. Millennials were doing that somewhat, but I think this new generation, it's kind of part and parcel to who they are.

Ethan: Can you identify what the trends are that pushed them that way? I was thinking of cooking shows, for instance, I'm not sure the cooking shows are just a reaction to their interest or are actually driving their interest.

Tanya: Well, the funny thing is I just recently saw a presentation on different generations, and gen z, they asked them, well, who are the most influential people in your life? And all of their influencers were actually from social media. They weren't people that you or I probably could even identify. And so these are the people that they're looking to. They're looking to their peers who are doing interesting, avant garde things with cooking, with makeup, with fashion and all these different ways, and they're looking to them to kind of pioneer new ways of doing things, so it's not Julia Childs and it's not Rachel Ray and it's not the Oprahs and it's not those kind of people that we could identify. It's this whole new kind of organic influencer.

Ethan: When I think about your job and having to put your finger on trends in our day and age, as you just sort of alluded to, the trends are going in a million different directions. There's cross cultural influences, there's this entire social media world that is almost so difficult to sort of parse or understand, I wonder, do you despair some days of trying to figure this out?

Tanya: It's interesting. So if I had identified things, I would talk about risk, I would talk about relationship and I would talk about personalization. That's how I would group them. I think that right now we're just in a political climate, social-political climate that's uneasy for a lot of people. People feel like they're at risk in general and they're trying to mitigate that risk. So people are afraid about things like food safety, food waste, food equity, those types of things, in addition to social equity and these other types of issues as well, so you see it reflected in general.

So people feel safe at home, generally, but as they move further and further out they feel more and more at risk, and for that reason, I think that people are looking to know more about their food, know more about their communities. They're really starting to try to get engaged with what's going on around them and they're putting more onus on food manufacturers to tell them more, give them more information and to produce the best that they can. Given the constructs, right, that they that they have to go through. So I think the risk is that, in that respect, in terms of food. But to supplement this idea of risk, it's because you feel at risk, people want deep, rich relationships and they're not finding them very easily, not even with their own families sometimes, so they're looking to create that in other ways, and food is one of the ways that I see people trying to build intimacy, trying to say, ok, you know, let's share things that break barriers, let's break bread together. And they're trying to learn more about diversity and complexity, so I see food moving in that direction.

Very global mixology, you see it in drinks to where people are bringing together things that don't seemingly go together, but they try to create new things. And then lastly, the idea of personalization where they're trying to say, I still want something that's uniquely me, uniquely about me. I want to feel like I'm special amongst the crowd. And they do that with food as well, and so we see people moving into very personalized diets, wanting to know more about how their body functions with the microbiome, getting that tested, getting their dna tested, trying to figure out, am I, you know, lactose intolerant, am I bad with gluten or whatever it is that they're trying to find out about themselves. So we see them doing that with food, but I think that that's reflective of a larger desire to be special, to understand themselves intimately, for other people to understand them in that way.

Ethan: We've certainly seen a lot of interest in food as medicine, functional foods. Do you feel that? That's a trend that you see out there? Do you feel like that's a fad, or something that we're going to see from here on out?

Tanya: Well I think that it's not a trend at all. I think that it's something very old, very ancient. I think that people throughout mesoamerica, for sure in my anthropological research, have always seen the benefits of food, different functions that they that they provide, like, for instance, yerba buena is very popular in hispanic culture because it calms the stomach, so it's a tea—it's an herb that you make into a tea—so we've known for centuries and centuries that this this food functions in this way. And you can go to any culture and they will also have their native herbs and native plants and so forth that are foods, but also have very distinct benefits. And so I think that what we're experiencing today is not a fad or trend, it's actually a reflection of the past. And people are looking at those things and understanding their value and then bringing them to bear today, but in unique ways. So you see like yerba mate, which is, again, an herb that was used in a ritualized tea in South America, but you see that now Guayaki company has made it into ready-to-drink tea that you can drink cold and you can pick up at your local retailer. So they're understanding the benefits of the tea, but they're using it in a different way out of its cultural context to some extent.

Ethan: The functional foods that have really taken off often are the ones that have that reach into another culture. They have a way to identify a story into the culture.

Tanya: Authenticity, that's what people want. Again, back to that idea of relationships, back to the idea of special and personalization. People want things that are good for you, functional, but also authentic.

Ethan: Right. And there's a whole new start up culture, and Silicon Valley. They're beginning to go into the lab to create things that are supposed to fulfill all your nutrient needs. But I wonder eventually, if those lab made products that are supposed to be, you know, provide some sort of specifics or brain health, or physical health will actually ever take off in the same way those ones that have the cultural heritage attached to them will.

Tanya: It's interesting. I think that culture most slowly, and I don't think those things are on the horizon maybe in the next decade, but I definitely see in years to come that they will become much more important. Simply because of the state of the environment and the pressures that we're seeing being put on the environment with population growth and then also with climate change and so forth that we might

have to seek new ways of eating foods that we traditionally loved or looking for new food sources. And so the merging of food and technology, I think, is getting more acute, more rapid, and I don't see it as completely out of the question in terms of people's cultural adaptation to it. I think again, necessity is the mother of invention, and sometimes we may be in a circumstance that we may need to try something new, whether it's with alternative meats, lab grown meat, plant proteins or things like liquid-fication of meals.

Ethan: So, I'm curious about restaurants in low socioeconomic communities. Are the trends there that you find interesting?

Tanya: I think that restaurants are really trying to get families in. Everybody's kind of suffering, you know, in terms of losing business to other ways of procuring food. But what I do see happening is a lot of family value specials, so places that are in the barrio are usually—like let's say a fish place—a fish place will have a family value option that they know the types of families that are coming in to give them that really good experience, a filling experience at a good value. You see the same thing with chicken places, same thing with taco places that they're really understanding that there's different size families coming in here, and they have a manager special that will accommodate them all. So I do see that happening more than individualistic, you know, where everybody's ordering their own plate, it's kind of like one dish for everyone type of idea that I see happening there in that restaurant.

Ethan: That's lovely. Going back to that issue of food equity. What trends do you see? Are you hopeful about the world of food becoming more equitable in our time or is the train pointing in a different direction?

Tanya: I think that people are becoming more aware of food and equity. I think that, for instance, with food waste people are becoming aware, like wow, I have excessive consumption and I throw all this food away and there are starving people, and so I should use more of my food. So I think they're becoming more aware in that way. But the infrastructure of changing inequities I don't think people are passionate about. I think they're willing to eat less or eat differently or maybe have a different package if it's not going to affect someone else's food sources and that type of thing, but people don't typically want to be inconvenienced.

What I'm really hopeful about though, is channels for how people can procure food through Amazon, through other kinds of direct shipping, through some of the meal prep services that are a little pricey now, but getting more affordable, that they can reach people that are actually geographically in a food desert. And so that food can get to them easier, but I think we're still a long way from understanding the complexity that creates hunger. And we can hear a story and feel sorry for that person, but I don't think we're at the place where we want to change a lot of our inherent behaviors, not to go hungry, but to really understand that there are people who do not have the same socioeconomic status that you do, and for that reason, they don't have access, not just to food, but to health care and to a lot of other things. And that's a harder story for the consumer to take.

Ethan: When you talk about the value customer, what are we talking about in terms of—say they have a family of four—how much do they have to spend on that dinner for the lower ten percent of the socioeconomic ladder?

Tanya: So the government does establish certain guidelines that talk about what is considered poverty, right, and what you should be spending on a meal. I don't know those off the top of my head, but I can say it intuitively, as a social worker: people are wanting to spend maybe ten bucks to make dinner, you know, and ten bucks doesn't go far when you're trying to feed a family of four, especially if you have teenagers, right? Everybody is technically an adult it's hard to feed people on maybe ten bucks, but I would say that once you were hitting ten dollars, you really needed to be able to make a claim to the consumer to say no, really, this is going to stretch or this is going to do something else for your family. They're pretty strapped. I mean, you think about that, you're only talking about two fifty a person. That's not a lot.

Ethan: I've got to say, I really like the idea of your job, because you know, we take supermarkets for granted, how we eat food, we all have our patterns of eating food. But the way we do it as a culture is really deep and fascinating. There's so many layers to it and there's so many messages in there, and I just like the idea that you're out there, trying to figure it out a little bit at a time. I know that all those issues go to the creation of Vital Cuisine which is designed for people going through chemotherapy to bring the joy of food back to them during this really physically and mentally difficult time. I know you worked on that project as well, right? So that must have been deeply moving to see, to talk to those people about what they're going through at that time of their life.

Tanya: Absolutely. And just seeing how illness affects not just the patient but the family, and especially if it's a mom who's doing the majority of the cooking and now she can't taste as she's cooking, or she can't enjoy what she has cooked with her family, and so there's so many layers that go into illness and how the person is coping physically, how they're coping emotionally, all with food. Just profound stories. I had a foodie who was thirty one who had lymphoma, and they would have these battles in their kitchen, him and his friends, as like Iron Chef battles, and he had traveled the world collecting wine and just in love with food, and now everything tastes metallic to him. So he just can't eat anything, so just giving him another option was really rewarding and I really enjoyed that. But even simple things like healthier snacks, a better for you snack like our natural choice snack line, even that is something, a win. It's helping somebody make a better choice like, ok, I'm not doing so well, but I've got that one good thing that I did for myself today. And to me that's elevating your day and that's what we want to do at Hormel.

Ethan: I think that's absolutely right. I mean, you have, especially in Napa Valley, you have a lot of food purists, these ideas that there's only one way to do it and you can only have this type. It's got to be this super organic farm to table, which is great. Which is great if you have the income to do it and you live in Napa Valley it's fantastic, but then there's this idea of like, everyone has to eat every day and they have to do it on a budget, and we want to make choices, both his individuals but also as a company, and to move the needle a little bit, towards health, towards value, towards a food that brings people together. And you do that incrementally. You don't go all the way to one end and change the system. You do it day by day, and I think we do that it's individuals. But I also think that that's what companies like Hormel are trying to do.

Tanya: Exactly, and I saw that with my grandma using SPAM® and eggs, because she didn't feed us an off brand, she fed us SPAM®, and it was just a little bit of SPAM® per kid with a taco of SPAM® and eggs, but it was that little bit of quality, a little bit of *je*, a little bit of something better, you know? So not just the health aspects but the

quality aspects that you're getting something nice. I watched a woman make her own homemade chili with rice and some home cooked beans and some hamburger meat, but she put a can of Hormel chili in there because she said that's really the flavor I want to achieve, but I don't know how and I can't buy a giant a giant can of hormel chili, so I'm putting all these leftovers in here with that can, and that's what makes it. That's powerful for me to think that, that, to her, is elevating her chili to the best. And that's why we want for people to feel like they're getting the best they can get.

Ethan: Consumers have so much information about the value of food and the health of food and what's good for them, what's bad for them, different forms of diets. But it's just coming at them over the internet. Certainly there's more information than you could possibly handle. I'm wondering if that just leads to a general sort of confusion out there, or if people are getting good information or bad information. What do you think?

Tanya: I think there's certainly that top ten percent of influencers that know where to find the good information. They know how to filter through all of the bad sources and find the primary sources, the research and so forth, so I think they definitely definitely exist, but I think the vast majority of consumers are absolutely inundated with information, and so I think it's really important that we cut through some of the cacophony of sound, so to speak, of all these voices to really help consumers understand what they need and what's best for them.

So I see some of this confusion around protein. Consumers understand that it's a building block of good nutrition. They're not absolutely sure what it does but they know it does something good, and then you ask them, well how much do you need? And they're like, I don't know. How much do your kids need? I'm not sure but, I know a lot, so if it says protein I'm going to get it. But they don't really understand the complexities of the protein or the amounts, and so that's something that we can help filter out the noise and give them more credible information so that they know a resource to go to. But you see them do that with even calories. Some who are taking care of elderly or sick patients are like, I don't know, the doctor told me to just ply them with calories, but all they want to eat is milkshakes, and I'm not sure that's the right thing, and so they get confused about, okay, no, it's, a lot of calories, but I know that they need to be meaningful calories. And so you see them struggle a lot when you're in the interviews to try to make the distinctions.

Ethan: Tanya, thanks so much for talking with us today.

Tanya: Thank you so much for having me. I enjoyed it.

Ethan: So that about wraps it up for us. I'm Ethan Watters. I've been talking with Tanya Rodriguez, anthropologist at Hormel Foods. For more information, go to hormelfoods.com, and please join us again next time.