



Strange Foods and Customs in World History

Weird History Handout Series – Vol. 5

Food traditions tell stories about culture, survival, and creativity. Many dishes and customs that seem shocking today were once delicacies, status symbols, or necessities. This handout explores unusual foods and customs from Europe, Asia, and the Americas, offering a glimpse into humanity's adventurous palate and fascinating cultural rituals.

I. Europe

Pie Filled with Live Birds

In medieval banquets, chefs baked pies filled with live birds as a theatrical surprise. Guests would cut into the crust, and birds would fly out, creating a spectacle of wealth and extravagance. This tradition inspired the nursery rhyme "Sing a Song of Sixpence."

Casu Marzu (Maggot Cheese)

This Sardinian specialty is a sheep's milk cheese fermented with live insect larvae. Considered a delicacy, it's banned by EU regulations but still secretly enjoyed. The wriggling maggots are eaten with the cheese — proof of Europe's daring culinary heritage.

Wine Mixed with Seawater

Ancient Greeks and Romans sometimes added seawater to wine for preservation and taste. Known as "oenos thalassites," it symbolized trade and luxury. Some Greek wineries still experiment with this unusual method today.

II. Asia

Century Eggs (China)

Century eggs are preserved duck or chicken eggs, aged in a mixture of clay, ash, and salt for months. The yolk turns dark green, and the flavor becomes intensely savory. This traditional snack dates back centuries and remains popular in Chinese cuisine.

Natto Fermented Soybeans (Japan)

Natto is a sticky, pungent dish made from fermented soybeans, eaten for breakfast in Japan. Though the texture and smell challenge newcomers, natto is valued for its health benefits and has been part of Japanese diets for over a thousand years.

Bird's Nest Soup

A Chinese delicacy made from edible bird nests created by swiftlets with hardened saliva. Highly prized for its texture and supposed health benefits, it has been served at royal banquets for centuries and remains a luxury food.

III. The Americas

Aztec Chocolate with Chili and Corn

Aztecs drank a bitter chocolate beverage spiced with chili and thickened with cornmeal. Far from today's sweet treat, this drink was reserved for warriors and nobility, symbolizing

power and wealth in Mesoamerican culture.

Huitlacoche (Corn Fungus)

Known as “corn smut,” this fungus infects maize and was considered a pest by Europeans. In Mexico, it’s prized as a delicacy for its earthy flavor and nutritional value. Today, chefs call it “Mexican truffle.”

Inca Ritual Drinking Vessels

The Inca used ceremonial cups called “keros,” often made of wood or silver, for ritual drinking of chicha (fermented corn beer). These customs were essential in religious and political ceremonies, reflecting social hierarchy.

IV. Global Customs

Eating Gold and Silver

Throughout history, wealthy elites in Europe, India, and the Middle East have consumed gold and silver leaf for display of wealth. This trend continues in modern luxury dining, where gold-covered desserts or drinks cost hundreds of dollars.

Wedding Food Challenges

Cultures worldwide have unique wedding traditions: in Korea, the groom’s feet are beaten with fish before marriage; in medieval Europe, “bride ale” was brewed by the bride for guests, linking celebration with craft brewing.