

Interview with Caitlin Morgan, February 2019

Caitlin Morgan is a PhD candidate in Food Systems at the University of Vermont. Her work sits at the intersection of systems thinking, ecological economics, ecofeminism, agroecology, and sensory studies. Her dissertation research involves two case studies: one of a full-diet CSA farm in upstate New York, the other of a taste-based research and education center in Denmark called Taste for Life. In both studies, Caitlin is investigating the motivations for radical food projects, and what the visions and actions behind such projects could illuminate about systems-level change. Her master's thesis, also at UVM, centered on food agency in a low-income urban community.



What does “food culture” mean to you?

It means: highly specific, personal, and based in identity, community, and historical-political-economic context. Food culture is the ocean that our food choices swim in. It is dynamic and changeable and affects us in deep ways, sometimes ways we are unaware of.

Why are food culture studies relevant in your perspective?

I don't believe we can understand the food system without understanding food culture. It is a primary driving force behind all other decisions made throughout the food chain, so we need to consider it when thinking about economics, sustainability, or other big food-related questions. But food culture studies also matter in their own right. Knowing our food cultures is a way of knowing ourselves as humans.

What is your favorite food/dish, and why?

Pie! It is incredibly flexible—sweet or savory, vegetarian or meat-based—and can be an entire meal in one dish. Plus, growing up in New England, one gets very nostalgic about apple pie.

How does your work relate to food culture/in what way do you work with food culture?

My research is about food systems, a very big-picture and holistic approach to food studies. I primarily work with food culture by trying to bring in into conversations where it may otherwise be left out; for example, in questions of sustainable food production. My job is often to remind people who tend to think about the environment or health that people make choices based on personal desire and culture. That's not only true, it's perfectly reasonable, and needs to be part of our conversations as academics or activists.

Please tell us about the most exciting experience you have had with food(culture)

When I was doing research in Denmark, I attended a food festival and tried a kind of Swedish fermented fish. I have never smelled anything so pungent; it practically knocked people over. And it's proof that food culture matters a lot in what we think is good to eat!

Where would you like to see the study of food culture go in the near future / what perspectives on food culture needs more attention in your opinion?

I would like to see food culture integrate more into other fields' considerations of food. As a transdisciplinary scholar, I think the more we can talk across disciplines, the better we will be able to solve problems in the future—and the better we'll eat, in the meantime.