

Cooking, eating and digesting: Notes on the emergent normativities of food and speeds

Sebastian Abrahamsson

AISSR Department of Sociology and Anthropology,
University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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Abstract

This article analyses conflicting versions of speed and temporal work that are involved in engaging with food. The dominant discourses around fast and slow food are challenged and extended by juxtaposing three kinds of food-related activities: cooking, eating, and digesting. Drawing on a wide range of empirical and theoretical examples and dietary advice, I illustrate how modes of engaging with foods also produce and come with specific “goods” and “bads.” Problematizing these normativities, I use the Swedish word ‘lagom’ to denote a temporal and spatial normativity that is always located in a specific situation.

Keywords

Fast food and slow food, speed, normativity, eating, bodies

The speed of food

Vehicles can have speed, animals and humans as well. A fast car may cover 100 km in an hour and a very quick runner can sprint 100 m in less than 10 s. The physicist Galileo Galilei is sometimes credited for having invented the formal definition of speed as the distance covered, by a body, per unit of time. However, as the story about Achilles and the tortoise sprinting and crawling toward the finishing line tells us, bodies have different speeds, and there are different ways of measuring these. But what is the speed of food?

Corresponding author:

Sebastian Abrahamsson, AISSR Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Amsterdam, Kloveniersburgwal 48, Amsterdam 1012 CX, The Netherlands.

Email: c.s.abrahamsson@uva.nl

Food produces rhythms, patterns, and temporalities, punctuating everyday life through practices of cooking, eating, and digestion, the speeds of which may be measured, in different ways, to different ends, and with different effects (Coleman, 2010). First, then, food has speed like any other object has: an apple falls from a tree with a speed that Newton helps us to calculate (Westfall, 1993: 51–52); food-goods travel with various speeds across the oceans, thanks to carefully assembled and networked objects that we call globalized transport systems (Law, 2002). Work on the transportation of food has highlighted the temporal normativity of organic edibles in terms of *freshness*, and the vast amount of time spent keeping edibles fresh (Freidberg, 2009). And research on domestic technologies and appliances—highlighting the *gendered* distribution of household work—has underlined the fact that, ironically, technologies meant to speed these things up, such as the microwave, the oven, and the fridge, often create more work, and take up more time, rather than less (Cowan, 1983). Meanwhile, food scholars have interrogated the formation and subsequent spreading of two centrifugal, and diametrically opposed movements, fast and slow food, through the familiar tropes of *production* and *consumption* (Goodman, 2002; Tam, 2008). With regard to the speed of food, there are many things at stake, indeed: health (Bowman et al., 2004), efficiency (Jabs and Devine, 2006), aesthetics (Miele and Murdoch, 2002), pleasure (Pietrykowski, 2004), tradition (Noguchi, 1994), to mention just a few of the many concerns raised in the literature. Second, and that is what I wish to articulate in this paper, food has a kind of speed that is particular to its situation: food can be grown and harvested; it can be cut, canned, and frozen; it can decompose and decay; it can be wolfed down or savored slowly; and it can be ingested, digested, and metabolized at different speeds in relation to an eating body. The speeds with which these things happen, I will suggest, involve a human body that, rather than measuring those speeds, qualifies them in (Heuts & Mol, 2013). Such qualifications come with normativities: they may be good and they may be bad. While the speed of falling apples can be measured, thanks to Galileo and Newton, the normative speeds of eating cannot be measured in advance but rather emerge through the specific situations wherein food is cooked, eaten, and digested.

In his critique of quantitative measurements of speed, Bergson (1998) argued that when movement is spatialized and measured it is also transformed. To illustrate, Bergson mobilizes Zeno's counterintuitive paradox which would have it that the tortoise who, starting the race against Achilles seconds earlier, wins the race because before catching up with the tortoise Achilles has to traverse an infinite number of points in space. Time measured or represented, then, is not the same as time lived or time unfolding (Crang, 2001; Russell, 2002). In lieu of measurement, Bergson (2008)

introduces the concept of duration which is the relative time *produced* when two or more bodies interact, affect, and encounter one another. In this paper, I will articulate the speeds of cooking, eating, and digesting through the trope of duration rather than through measurement. Duration comes into view in many ways but what is significant about it is that it emerges as a relational effect that is produced through an encounter between many different “bodies.” With duration, however, what a body *is* also changes.

A body, of whatever kind, is defined . . . in two simultaneous ways. In the first place, a body, however small it may be, is composed of particles; it is the relations of motion and rest, of speeds and slownesses between particles, that define a body, the individuality of a body. Secondly, a body affects other bodies, or is affected by other bodies; it is this capacity for affecting and being affected that also defines a body in its individuality.

This text, taken from Gilles Deleuze’s book (1988: 123) on Spinoza, talks about bodies as *relations of motion and rest* and *as speeds and slownesses between particles* and not about food or eating. It also speaks of *affects* and how different bodies affect one another. It mobilizes words and concepts such as particles, relations, individuality, affect, and capacities to define what a body could be. Cooking, eating, and digesting, as re-configured here through Deleuze and Spinoza, are relations between different bodies—yours or mine and a “body” that we may call food. Here, I will look specifically at those relations of speeds implicated in, and produced through, the activities of cooking, eating, and digesting. In what follows, I wish to bring together insights from these activities in the process of consuming food, relating them to the normative concept of “lagom,” a Swedish word that, if translated would mean neither too fast nor too slow, neither too much nor too little. I wish to use the concept of “lagom” to show the plurality and multiplicity of times and speeds that are at stake in the consumption of food. Similar to Nowotny’s concept of “proper time” (Nowotny, 1994), “lagom” evokes the specific and irreducible temporality of an event, a happening, or process. The material that I mobilize is drawn partly from autoethnographic accounts, partly from media, and partly from other research into the speeds of foods (c.f. Mol, 2008). In order to unpack the configuration of food, speeds, and normativity that I want to approach here, let me first start out by giving you a sense of “food memories” (Holtzman, 2006) from childhood.

Remembering foods and speeds

Born in Sweden in 1925, my grandmother, whose name was Aina, saw it as one of her many goals in life to feed her husband, her child and, later in life, her

grandchildren. Growing up, she had become convinced that the path that leads into a man's (or anybody's) heart goes through the stomach. She felt happy and appreciated it when others ate what she had cooked. Conversely, I would like to think that she liked to cook. Every weekend, Aina and her husband would take their car to go shopping at a nearby supermarket complex. Comparing the prices on milk, eggs, ground meat, and fish was part of this weekly routine. Writing detailed shopping list and planning weekly menus was imperative. And knowing the layout of the supermarket—where to find the bread, where dairy products could be located—was also part of the routine. Once at home, and after unpacking the groceries, Aina could spend hours cutting, stirring, pickling, frying, chopping, and baking, perfecting or experimenting with a recipe. Meanwhile, her husband was not particularly interested in the practicalities of cooking. He would stare out the window, clean their car, or work in the garden, unknowing of what went on in the kitchen. Things to do with the kitchen were off limits for him, the distribution of household space was profoundly gendered (c.f. Valentine, 1999).

Once seated at the table, Aina would frequently pass nasty comments on her husband and his table manners. "Just look at him: one moment food is on his plate and the other it is all gone. He is like a vacuum cleaner." While eating, the passage from plate to stomach was slowed down only by the limited size of his mouth and the grinding and sporadic chewing of teeth. Other times she could compare him with a bulldozer, a sewer, or a shredder: an efficient and speedy, yet crude piece of technology. It could be inferred from these evocative images that Aina did not approve of her husband's eating habits. However, playing the role of a good wife, who also happened to be a nurse, she used those images also to warn her grandchildren of the perils that rapid eating might cause. "Don't eat so fast or you will end up with a peptic ulcer," she would say, reminding them that they should "chew at least 10 times before swallowing" as this would help with proper digestion. Eager to go out and play again, the grandchildren followed their grandfather's example and ate as fast as possible while at the same time remembering to express, with mouths full of food, appreciation and gratitude to their grandmother.

Aina would cook traditional Swedish cuisine. A diet more or less reducible to meat or fish, potatoes, a vegetable such as carrot, onion, or cabbage presented with a gravy called "brunsås" (literally "brown sause") and lingonberries. The number of spices added was limited—maybe some black pepper, perhaps a pinch of grated nutmeg, or, to really spice things up, a touch of paprika. Presented together with a piece of whole grain crisp bread and a glass of whole milk, every dinner had a sufficiently divergent range of flavors for a potential dinner guest. Reflecting and expressing local geographies of Swedish agriculture, my grandparents' working class backgrounds, and the

particular history of cooking in Sweden following the post war period, the food Aina cooked is summed up in the expression “husmanskost” (literally “house owner food”) (Bildtgård, 2009). The Swedish cuisine has not travelled as far as the Indian or Italian kitchens to mention two rapidly travelling examples (c.f. Cook and Crang, 1996). However, figures such as the *Swedish Chef* from *The Muppet Show* probably helped in speeding up the travelling of the Swedish meatball, and with 316 stores in 38 countries *IKEA* restaurants and food markets provide potential buyers of furniture with shrimp sandwiches, meatballs, mashed potatoes and lingonberries, gravlax, pickled herring, and knäckebröd, all of which could be characterized as *husmanskost*. In essence, Swedish *husmanskost* is food that is not necessarily surprising, or tasty, but that does the trick; food that is neither expensive nor extravagant, but that satisfies a hungry stomach. Nevertheless, and despite the limited repertoire of ingredients, Aina always managed to turn every meal into an enjoyable and memorable experience.

From these mingled memories, I want to crystallize three concerns with food and speed around which the remainder of this text is organized. The first one has to do with cooking, an activity that I take to include planning menus, shopping for, and preparing food. Cooking, in this sense, involves many different versions of speed and levels of analysis. Planning weekly menus is tedious, but saves a lot of time that would be spent shopping only for one day; grabbing a snack at the closest snack bar, by contrast, is quick and convenient but relies on the temporal work of “distant others” (Cook et al., 2006). Mashing potatoes or marinating and beating meat is time consuming, but a mashed potato and tender meat requires fewer chewing cycles and is quicker to eat. In the section *cooking* below, I will approach these differences with reference to the tropes of fast food and slow food. The second concern is related to the mechanics of eating, i.e. biting, chewing, and swallowing on the one hand, and the speeds these produce on the other hand. Hurried bodies, e.g. children who are eager to run out and play, might find it more difficult to sit down and sit still, than bodies that are not in such a rush (Mattsson and Helmersson, 2007). But this may also be a matter of what is eaten: while eating raw vegetables or chewy and dry meat takes time and require both healthy teeth and strong jaws, soup and liquid food can slip down quickly (c.f. Chen, 2009). In the second section *eating*, I will articulate this relation between the mode in which something is eaten and the thing eaten by analyzing different accounts of what it is to eat quickly and slowly. In the third section, *digestion*, I analyse the temporal work of digestion and metabolism and the paths by which food travels through a body. Historical and contemporary accounts of medicine and diets suggest that food that is rich in fiber will lubricate the intestines and make way for a quick passage (Whorton, 2002). By contrast, a high-fat and lower fiber diet may not only clog up and slow down the colon,

but may also suspend and wear and tear the bodies through which they pass (Berlant, 2007). And someone who wishes to maximize performance and become quicker during a longer period of time—e.g. marathon runners—might benefit from concentrated and small doses of fructose, dextrose or glucose—the so-called “fast carbs”—during the event. In the third part below, I will explore how different foods affect the speed by which digestion occurs and, reciprocally, how bodily activity affects the speed of the digestion of food.

Cooking

The argument that contemporary life is characterized by increasing speeds is a concern voiced in many contexts, and with different effects. In terms of globalization, mobility of labor, goods, and humans, and global connectedness, increased speeds can be seen as liberating (e.g. Giddens (2002) as stifling (Bauman, 1998) or as both (Urry, 2007)). Rapid changes in technological infrastructure and communications and transportation systems have created a sense of the world shrinking, and of the transition from present to future happening with ever increased speeds (Harvey, 1990; Mackenzie, 2002; Virilio, 2006). It is in this context that we may learn from influential and popular accounts of the temporal ordering of social labor and the temporal organization of food production, such as Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* (2006), Wilson's *Chew on This: Everything You Don't Want to Know About Fast Food* (2006), and films such as Spurlock's *Super Size Me* (2004) and Kenner's *Food Inc.*, (2008), that the speeding up of food not only makes people who eat it obese, lazy, and unhealthy, it also disrupts local food production chains, it has devastating effects on biodiversity and ecology, and fast food companies exploit poor communities making people work for less than minimum wages (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). These accounts conjure a bleak development: people eat more and faster, growing bigger and fatter, and, as a consequence of food speeding up, bodies slow down. The negative appraisal of the fastness of fast food contrasts forcefully, however, with the many positive connotations that speed also has. Speedy things, whether they be trains, cars, runners, mail men, or computers, are good in the sense that they get things done, quickly. By contrast, a train that is delayed, a car that stands still, a runner who is outrun by other runners, lazy mail men, or a sluggish computer, cannot be anything but bad. A less hyperbolic account of fast food comes from a dictionary of food nutrition and science which states matter-of-factly:

Fast food (noun). Cooked food that can be prepared, bought and eaten quickly. (Anon, 2006: 94)

In the supposedly neutral language of the dictionary, fast food is harmless: it is quick to prepare, buy and eat, and, by extension, it is food that does not waste time (c.f. Noguchi, 1994). Like the knife, the microwave, the oven, or fire shortens cooking time, the qualification “fast” here indicates that there is time to be saved cooking, chewing, or planning ahead. In this particular sense, the increased speed of fast food facilitates life, making it less structured, less bounded and more efficient. When food is presented and marketed as fast, it is often in this latter sense. And one of the relevant instances through which the speed of food is ordered and organized is through the ordering device of the recipe.

Let me exemplify. Like many of the people living in my neighborhood, I buy my food at the local supermarket. On their webpage, customers can browse recipes using filters such as: starters, main dish, Indian, Greek, Italian, Dutch, cheap, organic, light, culinary, and fast.¹ Ticking the boxes “fast,” “budget,” “everyday food,” “pasta,” and “children” in the recipe database generates the following suggestion: salmon and spinach pasta. The dish consists of the following seven ingredients.

300 g farfalle (pasta, 500 g bag)
4 eggs
1 zucchini, sliced
2 tbsp of olive oil
1/2 cup light cuisine cream (a 250 ml)
1 bag of spinach (300 g)
1 cup of diced smoked salmon (150 g)

The instructions on how to prepare the dish read as follow:

1. Cook the pasta according to package directions until al dente. Meanwhile, boil the eggs in 8 minutes until hard. Plunge in cold water, peel and cut the eggs into wedges.
2. Brush the zucchini with the oil. Heat the grill pan and grill the zucchini for 4 minutes. Flip the zucchini after two minutes. Remove from pan.
3. Drain the pasta and put back into the pan. Mix it with the cuisine light and place the pan on low heat. Gradually add the spinach leaves and let them shrink while stirring. Mix with the salmon cubes.
4. Put the pasta into 4 bowls and divide the egg and zucchini on top.

This recipe serves four portions and the estimated duration for cooking is 10 minutes. A very fast dish in other words, especially when compared to other recipes on the website: trendy chili (30 min preparation, 300 min waiting time), rabbit with mustard (40 min preparation, 60 min waiting), or

beetroot soup with apple (40 min preparation). However, to make this dish quick, the ingredients that go into it are implicated in processes of slowing down: a bag of frozen spinach where the freezing has slowed down the process of decomposition; cream with preservatives added to prolong shelf life and reduce risk of fermentation; salmon that has been smoked for taste and longevity, and vacuum sealed to preserve freshness; and wheat dough that has been processed, dried, and packaged to make durable pasta. Meanwhile, transportation and production industries are operating around the clock to make ingredients available. The website automatically produces a shopping list and, given that the consumer enters the address for the supermarket, sorts the items according to the route he or she would have to take to reduce and optimize the time spent locating them in the supermarket. This, if anything, is food and cooking made fast, efficient, and convenient. It implies that consumers who have little time to shop, prepare, and cook food may use this recipe databank to plan ahead thereby converting time spent for producers and distributors into time saved for consumers and cooks.

However, the increasing speed with which the production and consumption of food happens is also contested in various ways. Rather than seeing this increased speed, the time saved, and the resulting convenience as liberating, advocates of slowness insist that

We are enslaved by speed and have all succumbed to the same insidious virus: Fast Life, which disrupts our habits, pervades the privacy of our homes and forces us to eat Fast Foods . . . So Slow Food is now the only truly progressive answer. (Petrini, 2003: xxiii)

In an attempt to counter what they perceived as an ever-increasing availability and proliferation of *fast* food, a group of concerned citizens in Rome, headed by Carlo Petrini, started a movement in the 1980s which later became known as the *Slow Food Movement*. The Slow Food Movement calls for an increased attentiveness to pleasure, taste, and the value of local products and culture, and acts as a subversion of acceleration and increased speeds of food (Parkins, 2004). Originating in Italy but now dispersed and spread across different parts of the globe, the movement seeks to cultivate a different tempo and rhythm of cooking and eating concordant with those rhythms and flows of life that are slow. A cook, and an eager supporter of slow food, Deborah Madison calls on eaters to find balance and harmony: 'To the person seeking a tempo of life that is more in step with life's natural rhythms . . . Slow Food offers a sympathetic response' (Madison, 2001: ix). Meanwhile, in the collection *Fast Food/Slow Food*, anthropologist Mintz (2006) observes, less hyperbolically, that while the ideological base of the slow food movement is sound,

only “a limited number of people, most of them in the West, most of them educated people of some means” (10) are practicing—indeed *can and have the means to practice*—slow food cooking, largely due to their economical, geographical, and social position. In these senses, the term *slow* food conjures and draws upon a wide range of practices—from sustainable production and consumption and the shared table dinner, to appreciation of tastes and pleasure and the conservation of traditional recipes and dishes. The speed of slow food, its slowness, is modeled on a countering of the speeds of fast food: where fast food offers eaters a fast and quick alternative, slow food, by contrast, calls on cooks and eaters to take time. Two contrasting speeds crystallize from this: one that is speeding up, and one that is slowing down. But rather than one being good and the other bad “in themselves,” they come with different normativities depending on their situation. The pasta recipe above is neither good nor bad in itself: someone looking to have a really fast meal will do better ordering take out, while someone looking for a sustainable alternative may want to buy local vegetables rather than frozen spinach.

The numerous meals that Aina prepared for her grandchildren took a long time to cook, and the ingredients and recipes used were part and parcel of local, traditional cuisine. These were cooked in a speed concordant with those sought through the slow food movement, but they were eaten hurriedly. However, while parents are often called upon to teach their children the importance of savoring slowly, remembering to chew frequently before swallowing (Atkins and Berkenkamp, 2001), Aina also took rapid eating as evidence for her good cooking skills. From her husband’s sporadic, and largely unsuccessful, experiments in the kitchen, she knew all too well that children (at least her grandchildren) would react with aversion to any food that was not tasty and appealing to the senses. And to make food taste good, taking time was necessary. After all, she spent all that time planning, shopping, and cooking in order that the food would be eaten and appreciated, and if this was done in a speedy manner then so be it. But not too speedy. Her husband ate too quickly, wolfing down his food in just a couple of minutes, not even taking enough time to savor and taste. To really appreciate the food, that had sometimes taken hours to prepare, dinner guests would have to pay their respect by eating their food neither too quickly nor too slowly: just as the time spent planning, shopping and cooking food, it should all be *lagom*.

Eating

These conflicting normativities of speed and food implied in cooking could suggest that a slowly cooked meal should also be eaten slowly. By contrast, at Aina’s dinner table, fast and convenient food would not, in this sense,

deserve as slow a treatment. Proponents of the Slow Food movement would have it that a dish that has *taken time* to prepare would also produce a dish that tastes more. But is so-called fast food *eaten quickly* and, conversely, is so-called slow food *eaten slowly*? Consumer research into eating practices suggests this is not necessarily so. Instead, other so-called environmental factors come into play. Comparing a “worksite cafeteria,” a “fast-food restaurant,” and a “moderately priced restaurant,” and measuring the time spent eating, Bell and Pliner (2003) suggest that rather than the food eaten, the number of people eating at the same table in a restaurant will affect the time spent eating: the more people present at the table, the longer time is spent eating the food. In the USA, Jabs and Devine (2006) argue that kitchen appliances—the microwave oven, rice cookers, and stoves—together with an increased prevalence of employed parents, pressure to increase productivity at work, and a corresponding need for convenience and time off, have dramatically changed eating patterns and the experience of time available to eat. North and Hargreaves (1996) and Wansink (2004) conclude that loud, fast, and discomforting music increase the speed with which guests eat. If that restaurant happens to serve Japanese, Chinese, or Vietnamese food and a potential eater encounters chopsticks for the first time, chances are he or she will spend more time calibrating his or her hands than hurriedly ingesting his or her food (c.f. Barber, 2009: 7). If, by contrast, that potential eater happened to dine alone, and the choice was between eating in a fast food restaurant or a moderately priced restaurant, chances are, according to Bell and Pliner (2003), that she or he will end up in the former, spending significantly shorter a time there than in the latter. In these studies, the speed of eating is configured as a relational and emergent effect that depends on the number of people eating at the same table, the presence and kind of music, and the technologies and utensils used. These are some of the intricate details we may learn about from studies on food consumption and the eaters’ environments with regard to the speed of food and eating.

Food consumption research thus attends to how social and material environments come to shape the speeds of eating, without paying much attention to the food at the eaters’ plates or articulating how eaters qualify their foods. By contrast, nutritional advice and medical sciences are full of normative recommendations with regard to the speed of eating. Eating food that has not been processed in one way or the other turns eating into a tedious and painstaking if not unhealthy, poisonous process. In this context, physical anthropologist Wrangham (2009) argues in his defense of cooked (as opposed to raw) food that the ability to eat quickly is bound up, in several ways, with the invention of cooking. By spending time cooking, humans could allow themselves to spend less time eating. “Cooked foods” (e.g. a steamed or boiled carrot as opposed to a raw one)

“are softer, and thus require fewer chewing cycles and a shorter time in the mouth before they form a coherent bolus and are swallowed” (Carmody and Wrangham, 2009: 382). Cooked foods, in this sense, are good because they are fast to eat.

But while the reduction of the time necessary to grind, chew, and swallow may allow for quicker eating, this introduces other problems. These problems are highlighted in literature concerning dietary advice and medicine to which I now turn. In a book published as early as 1905 on the “practical problems of diet and nutrition,” Max Einhorn, professor of medicine at the New York Postgraduate Medical School and Hospital, addressed issues pertaining to Euphagia (the art of “eating properly”) and tachyphagia or hasty eating, and bradyphagia or slow eating, two modes of “improper eating.”

In the animal kingdom, as well as also among uncivilized peoples, the obtaining of food forms the principal occupation during life. The necessity of obtaining food has remained the same with civilized man, but the manner of partaking of it has been changed partially to his disadvantage.

The concern that is addressed here reads like a prequel both to contemporary critiques of the speeding up of life (e.g. Tomlinson, 2007) and to contemporary concerns about “mindless eating” (Wansink and Sobal, 2007). Thus, beginning with the 19th century,

[n]ew interests have arisen, and the act of eating has been partially relegated to the background. Many busy persons scarcely take time to eat; they swallow hastily any kind of food without special selection, at times poorly prepared. The natural consequence of this is that under these conditions diseases of the digestive system develop quite frequently. (Einhorn, 1905: 1–2)

Einhorn’s diagnosis of the life of “civilized man” is characterized by increasing speeds and hasty eating. In this story, the fastness of cooked foods and the distractedness of the eater have become interrelated problems. The distinction between old and “new interests” seems to hinge on a difference between “civilized” and “uncivilized” peoples. While the latter are all occupied with gathering and eating food to soothe their hunger, the former occupy themselves with other interests (rest, leisure, pleasure, and so on). However, as Einhorn acknowledges, time is not equally distributed even among “civilized” people and so

with some patients (wealthy people, having no vocation) we must try to give them something to do; while in the case of merchants whose business strain is

too great, lawyers, and physicians, we should advice that sufficient leisure be taken. (Einhorn, 1905: 34)

For the medical community at the time, the problem of food that is eaten too fast was bound up with “civilization” in this particular sense: civilization means both abundance of food and shortage of time. However, this distinction (between civilized and uncivilized, or modern and pre-modern) is present also in the stories told by the physical anthropologists, and there speed is not the problem but rather the solution. Cooking “liberates” humans—according to Wrangham it is what make them human (Wrangham, 2009)—to the extent that hours spent chewing raw vegetables or peeling nuts and fruits is reduced to the minutes it takes to cut, boil, or fry those vegetables (thus softening them) and the seconds it takes to gulp down a glass of juice.

Today, advice on the speed with which eaters should eat—the normative configuration of “eating well”—comes in many shapes and forms. In the *American Dietetic Association complete food and nutrition guide*, parents are advised as follow: “help your child learn to eat slowly and pay attention to feeling full. By learning hunger and fullness cues, your child will learn to eat enough, but not overeat” (Larson Duyff, 2006: 415). The implicit message here is that eating slowly is no easy lesson to learn if food comes in abundance, and if it tastes good. But an increased amount of food eaten, and a high speed of eating, is not only associated with “civilized” societies, pleasure, or an abundance of food. Gorging and binge eating might also have been of evolutionary significance. Overconsumption, some biologists suggest, may have been a strategy used by our ancestors in order to grab food while there were resources around. This is how the story goes: during conditions where the availability of food was scarce, such behavior would have been good, assuring the survival of the individuals who managed to eat most. By contrast, slow eating, then, would go against the so-called “natural instincts.” Indeed, in nutrition science, fast eating as an evolutionary relevant fact is often mobilized as the “key” to what is framed as the “obesity epidemic” (Denney-Wilson and Campbell, 2008; van den Bos and de Ridder, 2006). However, what the evolutionary argument misses out on is that bodies that are full and satisfied *do* stop eating, irrespective of how much there is left on the plate, which is why the “all you can eat buffet” can still be a profitable concept. But eating too quickly, and forgetting to chew and swallow properly, is not good either since, as Einhorn cautions, the food will end up in the stomach only half masticated, and poorly salivated; so well known are the disadvantages of hasty eating that Einhorn finds “that it does not seem necessary to illustrate them by means of examples” (Einhorn, 1905: 4).

In the midst of all of these contradicting recommendations and versions of speeds and slownesses, the everyday life relations between food, speed, and bodies have slowly faded out of view. Let me therefore return to my grandmother, Aina. In her depiction of her husband above, there is a resonance with Einhorn's distinction between civilized and uncivilized: her husband, wolfing down food without bothering to chew, taste, or really paying any attention to the food, ate as if there was no tomorrow. Having retired a long time ago, he was not hurried to get back to work. And neither was he preoccupied with other things while he was eating. Indeed, at the dinner table, he paid attention only to his food, barely noticing the comments passed on by his better half. Meanwhile, having built up an appetite during the hours spent in the kitchen, Aina quickly followed suit. In this story, evolutionary psychologists would blame my grandparents' genetic makeup and ancestral past for their hurried eating. Einhorn, by contrast, would locate the problem in civilization. And health organizations such as the American Dietetic Association may blame poor upbringing. But there is yet another alternative. Sometimes, if the food Aina had prepared did not immediately appeal to her grandchildren (she would often add beans and cabbage to the dishes), they were bribed with ice cream and toffee sauce for dessert, but only if they finished what they had been served. In those instances, the tedious process of gulping down bean by bean, a process which could surely take up to three quarters of an hour, was followed by the hasty partaking of delicious vanilla ice cream. Beans and cabbage are not only slowly cooked, they are also foods that once eaten have slower rates of digestion and absorption. Once ingested, they traverse the alimentary tract in a most unhurried manner. In his historical exposé of the bean, Ken Albala cites the Byzantine author Michael Psellus who claimed that "even staying too long in a bean field sends pestilent fumes into the head, which renders our thoughts slow and weak" (Albala, 2007: 56). The vanilla ice cream, topped with fudge, on the other hand, slides down the throat easily, and as it is ingested, refined, and processed, sugar is quickly absorbed into the blood stream (see Kinsbourne, 1994). This idiosyncratic mix of "slow" carbs (from the beans and cabbage) combined with the quick "sugar rush" (from the ice cream and toffee sauce) produced children who after dinner would run around playing intensively for an hour or two and, later, be fast asleep.

Food, then, can be cooked slowly or quickly. It can be gulped down in haste, or savored bit by bit. For Aina, what was at stake here was pride, habits, and good manners. She took pride in cooking and feeding her family: on the one hand, although it worried her, her grandchildren's hurried eating reflected their appreciation, and on the other hand, her husband's rushed manners expressed, for her, a neglect of her efforts. As suggested earlier, the

good—lagom—for her was many things: moderate eating speed, appreciation, thriftiness, and healthy and tasty food. These normativities came into view through the punctuations and patterning of meals during the day. But they also emerged as local negotiations in the space of the dining room. The time efficiency that convenient foods, kitchen appliances, and technologies could offer was embraced by her, but never at the expense of the eating habits that she, as a nurse, cared for.

Digesting

As the difference between beans and ice cream above suggests, there is a temporality also of the stomach and the digestive tract. This brings me to my final issue which is about the internal speeds of food as it interacts with the body. To illustrate, let me introduce an example from a story taken from the BBC documentary *The Truth About Food*.² Picture this: two truck drivers are transporting goods across borders and between regions and countries somewhere in Europe. Before embarking on their journey, they buy rations of food that can withstand their long journey in room temperature, food that has a long due date, and edibles that can be eaten while sitting in the passenger seat of a truck that is moving, e.g. canned sausages, biscuits, crisps, dried meat, and so on. The only toilet stops they make are after they take a short break for warm lunch or dinner at one of the many truck stops scattered across Europe. Their diet is low in fiber and high in fat: hardly any vegetable, fruit, or bran, but lots of fried meat, gravy, snacks, the occasional white beans, and finally plenty of fried potatoes. This is an exemplary fast food diet: it is quick to eat, convenient, and saves the drivers a lot of time. However, when we shift to the speed of its digestion, it is far from fast. The so-called colonic transit time of the two drivers amounts to a staggering 22.5 and 42.5 h, respectively. But to radically change their diet and eating patterns is not possible due to the working load and pressure to deliver on time. Like the food they eat, truck drivers can sometimes take an uninterrupted highway to reach their destination. Other times, they will encounter blockage and obstructions along the way. Often they have to journey through narrow passages, taking winding roads to reach their destination. In order to speed up their journey, drivers use maps and global positioning systems to calculate which passage is the quickest one, but in terms of plotting the way for the food they eat, this is not easily done. So what to do? As the speaker voice explains:

It is not practical for the truckers to graze all day on raw fruits and vegetables. Instead, they're going to pack in the fiber with whole-grain cereal bars, granary bread and jacket potatoes as well as fruit with the skin on.

Now measure the time it takes for the food to pass from ingestion to excretion. Even better: picture it on a screen in live video feedback using a pill that one of the drivers swallow together with the food. The high-fiber diet has reduced the colonic transit time to 11 and 12.5 h, respectively, representing more than 50% increase in speed. While it may be tedious and tiresome to gnaw and grind raw vegetables and fruits, there is a reward at the end of the day: a smooth and swift transit through the bowels. Increasing the speed with which food passes through the body in this way is good for someone who usually spends his or her days driving a truck, eating that contains very little fiber (c.f. Abrahamsson, 2014).

The notion that low-fiber diet induced “bowel stasis” can cause all sorts of health-related problems, most notably cancer, can be traced back to the rise of influential health societies and medical associations in the early 20th century. While inventions such as the fridge and the microwave, or cooking techniques such as frying, boiling, or canned, preserved, and processed foods freed people from all sorts of constraints, explorers of the gastrointestinal tract dubbed intestinal diseases—constipation, diabetes, peptic ulcers, gum disease, hemorrhoids, cancer, and obesity—“diseases of civilization.” The genealogy of the digestive tract is described at length in Whorton (2002). Of particular importance is Robert McCarrison, a pioneer in the comparative anthropology of gastro-intestinal disorders, who in his Mellon lecture delivered before the society of biological research in Pittsburg in 1921 stressed, echoing the distinctions made by Einhorn, the importance to study “races” of people that had not yet been affected by civilization. McCarrison’s conclusion reads like a contemporary critique of convenient, fast food: the low-fiber diet of “civilized people” is faulty and the only way forward is in going back to unprocessed, high fiber “natural foods.” The notion that shaped public health care agendas in the UK and the USA throughout the 21st century was that there is an optimal “natural” rhythm to life, including the life of the bowels, and that by processing, refining, and altering food—put differently: increasing the speed of production and consumption of food—the rhythm of the bowels is also altered (Whorton, 2002). A pivotal ingredient in this distinction between civilized and uncivilized diets came from comparative work on the diets of people in Europe compared to the diet of people who lived “far removed from the refinements of civilization,” in the Himalayas and in Africa (McCarrison, 1922: 207). In regions of the Himalayas, gastrointestinal disease was so rare, McCarrison reports, that “amongst these people the abdomen oversensitive to nerve impressions, to fatigue, anxiety, or cold was unknown. Their consciousness of the existence of this part of their anatomy was, as a rule, related solely to the sensation of hunger” (McCarrison, 1922: 208).

There is more to say about the speed of food in the body than the speed with which food enters and exits the body. There is also the speed with which food is broken down and absorbed. Here, evolutionary science and zoology talk of metabolic rates and costs, designating the speed with which energy is exchanged and the energy needed to break down food, respectively (Mueller and Diamond, 2001; Wiens et al., 2006). Meanwhile, nutritional science talks about digestion rate and food properties, designating the speed with which food molecules are broken down, and how the particular food stuff affects that speed. One example is the glycemic index (GI) through which food is divided into three categories: low (55 and under), medium (56 to 69), and high (70 and above). Eating food with a low GI is said to help with a lot of things: losing and managing weight, reducing risk of heart disease, prolonging physical endurance, improving blood cholesterol levels, increasing the body's sensitivity to insulin, and so on. So how to do this? Foods with a low GI, so the argument goes, are absorbed slower, and cause less fluctuation in the blood sugar and insulin levels, than food with a high GI. Here, slow is good and fast is bad. Dietary advice might tell you to eat cereals based on oats, barley, and bran; eat bread with wholegrain, stone-ground flour, sour dough; avoid potatoes; eat fruits and vegetables; and enjoy pasta, noodles, and quinoa because these foods have a low GI.³ But that is not enough, because cooking, grinding, heating, mashing, and changing the properties of the food will affect the speed with which a body absorbs the carbohydrates. Depending on its texture, thickness, and molecular composition, pasta behaves differently once it reaches the insides of a body, or as Björck et al. (1994) put it, "from a technological point of view, pasta is not a homogeneous group" (700 S).

Macaroni are exemplary. In case her planning failed, my grandmother would always keep a box of "snabbmakaroner" (literally "fast macaroni") at home. These were used instead of potatoes, and they took significantly shorter a period to cook: three minutes cooking time for the macaroni as opposed to the 20–30 minutes it could take to peel and boil potatoes. In terms of carbohydrates, macaroni are relatively slow but within the group "pasta" they are surprisingly fast: nutritional science tells us that while spaghetti that is cooked for 5–15 minutes has a GI of 45 (low according to the official index), macaroni cooked during an equally long period has a GI of 68 (bordering on high) (Wolever et al., 1986). Following these numbers, eating macaroni raised and, after a period of approximately 2 h, lowered her grandchildren's blood glucose levels a bit faster than spaghetti would have done. This, however, is not what mattered. What mattered was that the macaroni were fast enough to cook, and that they were readily available as an alternative.

The many speeds of food and the normativities of “lagom”

In this paper, I have highlighted that the ways in which food and bodies coproduce speeds in daily life are varied. The activities of cooking, eating, and digesting involve temporal work at several levels, and involve different normativities. A first lesson that can be drawn from these observations is that food is intrinsically linked up with time and that it produces durations. This might seem obvious, but in the context of critiques of the increasing speeds by which life is lived, the fact that time is by necessity spent cooking, eating, and digesting is an important point to stress: while they are certainly quicker to prepare than the farfalle in the recipe above, fast macaroni do take 3 min to cook, and instant noodles are not instant. These activities may be speeded up and/or slowed down, but they will unavoidably take time. However, cooking, eating, and digesting not only take time, but they also produce temporalities, rhythms, and durations that punctuate life in different ways. This production of time could be about the ways in which food consumption—from consumer behavior in supermarkets, to eating pattern and eating rate, to environmental factors and cues—affects the speed by which food is consumed (Laurier, 2008). It could also be about the speed with which food and dishes are produced and prepared, e.g. the painstaking and laborious procedures of measuring time in relation to temperature involved in manufacturing a particular kind of cheese (Paxson, 2008), or the carefully regulated, time-managed, and disciplined assembly line production of food found in fast food restaurants (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). Finally, food and speed also relate to each other through a body that consumes food. Speed is what emerges as bodies and foods enter into relations such as cooking, eating, and digesting. Metabolic rate, digestion, colonic transit times, etc. are concepts that are mobilized in order to measure and express this speed. What is commonly termed “fast food” (high fat, low fiber) or “slow food” (fresh, unprocessed ingredients, rich in fiber) is, while digesting, often “slow food” and “fast food” respectively. What is slow and what is fast, and what is good and what is bad, emerge through the relation between the cook and the cooked, the eater and the eaten, the digester and the digested as these relations take place. The normativities of slowness and fastness, in other words, happen in situations and events that cannot be mapped in advance but, rather, materialize as relational effects in local situations.

By highlighting the conceptual work of the Swedish word “lagom,” I have suggested that these speeds and the normativities of particular activities be situated, both historically and spatially. Again I return to my

grandmother. Having lived through periods of scarcity and relative poverty, she appreciated food. Throwing food away was out of the question, and she enjoyed tinkering with different techniques that would extend the durability of foodstuffs. But having reached a period in her life when she could finally enjoy abundance, she wanted others to be able to share that experience with her. One thing was sure: no one had to run the risk of leaving her house with an empty stomach. Still, she warned her dinner guests never to take more food than they could finish. She also told them not to eat too fast, and, even if unsuccessful, told her grandchildren, to rest after dinner, “to let the food sink in.” The cautionary word she used here was the Swedish word “lagom,” supposedly untranslatable into any other language. Myth has it that the word originates from pre-industrialized Agrarian society and is a contraction of “laget om” (“around the team”)—when people ate from the same pot and drank from the same cup, each guest had to make sure to take neither too much nor too little so that there was enough food and beverage for everyone around the table (Parkvall, 2009). What is too much and too little, good and bad, and what is too fast and what is too slow? In the sense of “lagom,” these questions cannot be answered beforehand; indeed, as I have suggested—via Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza (Deleuze, 1988)—this is not for anyone to say beforehand. Rather, the temporal normativities of “lagom” are produced immanently in a situation. In this specific sense, the temporality of “lagom” is not a “proper time” (Nowotny, 1994), if proper is taken to imply that there is a given and already established good or bad speed with which an activity comes to happen. By contrast, the normativity of “lagom” is irreducible to the situation and context in which it is invoked. In this sense, “lagom” is neither a call for moderation and self-discipline nor for a *laissez faire* attitude *in itself*. Instead, it calls upon eaters to adapt to, and to actively adapt, the specific situation that they find themselves in.

Cooking food can be done in a hurry, or it can take hours, or days. Food that is cooked is quicker to chew, swallow, and digest than raw food; conversely, uncooked food takes longer to chew and savor. In addition, cooking also increases the energetic value of food. What is normally termed fast food, however, is often digested slowly. A clogged up and slow colon can be speeded up by adding fiber. Not too much though or the food that is eaten will pass through the body too quickly. In conclusion, fast and slow food can be both good and bad; sometimes fast is better than slow, and other times slow is better than fast. Where nutritional science, dieting advice, food commercials, or proponents of slow food might tell consumers to consume at moderate or balanced speeds, *lagom* introduces an idiosyncratic and local difference. Lagom is neither too much nor too little, and it is neither too fast nor too slow, it is neither bad nor good *in itself*, without the

situation in which it is evoked. The normative speeds of lagom, then, become an effect of the situations through which those speeds are produced. As a mode of qualifying and relating, it is co-produced, situational, and local. It is lagom.

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Notes

1. <http://www.ah.nl/> (accessed 2 March 2014).
2. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/sn/humanbody/truthaboutfood/> (accessed 5 January 2014).
3. <http://www.glycemicindex.com/> (accessed 8 January 2014).

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