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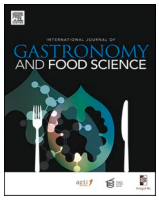

Taking a closer look at the Swedish coffee break, "fika"

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A B S T R A C T

In recent times, commensality or eating together has been discussed as an important part of family culture and identity, and as one of the most important parts of socialization. Here we would like to draw attention to the Swedish fika break, an in-between meal of particular significance in Sweden, where fika is an everyday ritual at home as well as in the work place. As with other commensality practices, the most valuable parts are not the edibles or drinkables that are consumed but what is created over those edibles and drinkables. We outline possible ways that Fika could be studied and potential dimensions of particular interest.

1. Introduction

Over the last twenty years or so, commensality or eating together has been discussed as an important part of family culture and identity, and as one of the most important parts of socialization (Fischler, 2011; Plessz and Wahlen, 2022; Yngve et al., 2021). Many households nowadays, especially in urban environments, are single households, and the number of elderly is increasing (Beard et al., 2016). The importance of eating together has been shown to be significant for the elderly (Bjornwall et al., 2021). Eating together or, at least, meeting together will probably become even more important for health and wellbeing in the future. We still do not know what aspects of commensality have the greatest influence on health and wellbeing and perceived health; is it the meeting as such; is it the content of the meal; or is it the cultural significance of the common meal that is the important part [9]. Or do they all work together in a synergistic manner to provide a greater benefit?

Research on commensality has been more frequent in ethnography and time studies than in nutrition and health studies (Scander et al., 2021). Nutritionists have tended to focus their research on main meals such as breakfast, lunch and dinner. "In-between meals" were either ignored or lumped into a single category of "other". The categorization of different meals provides some comparability, but as shown in Sweden the "other" eating category shows a very diverse pattern of eating, including evening snacks, FIKA of course and other in-between meal items. The "other" category provides not only healthy nutrients, but also a lot of energy including drink energy from alcoholic drinks or soda (Scander et al., 2018; Swedish National Food Agency, 2012). Here we would like to draw attention to the Swedish fika break, an in-between meal of particular significance in Sweden, especially from a commensality perspective (Fischler, 2011; Scander et al., 2021). Essentially a break over coffee and pastries or a sandwich, fika is an uncomplicated meal that does not require a lot of preparation. It can take place at home, at work, at cafes and on any outing. The concept of Swedish Fika is spreading internationally and studies show that 73% of global tourists with an interest in Sweden wish to experience Fika when they visit Sweden (Visit Sweden, 2021). In 2022, the Academy of culinary arts and meal science organized the first ever session on Fika at an international gastronomy conference (Hult et al., 2023), and will do so again in 2023 when Stockholm is the European Capital of Gastronomy (Stockholm Gastronomy Conference, 2023).

In the Swedish workplace, coffee and tea are almost always available for free. Fika is usually a midmorning or midafternoon break – for all staff. With no agenda, the fika break is the Swedish space for small talk. Topics of conversation during fika range from the weather to workplace matters. However, the fika break is not a place to actually work. Since fika is a daily, and often twice daily phenomenon, the cumulative effect of the small talk is massive when it comes to getting to know each other, building trust and solving problems; and can lead to a more humane and more efficient workplace.

The fika fare may be pastry that someone baked or purchased, or a sandwich or a piece of fruit brought from home. In the healthcare sector, it is common for workplaces to provide coffee, tea and sandwiches, and for the cost to be deducted directly from an employee's salary.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, a lot of work time was spent at home

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in front of the computer. Working from home became an important part of work life, and in Sweden, for those where work allows, the "norm", has now become spending two of the five working days per week working from home. Naturally, this is detrimental to the workplace fika break – where presence of all is usually expected. Virtual meal breaks have been discussed as an important development. Inviting someone to your home for fika in Sweden usually means serving a small meal consisting of coffee and pastries or a sandwich. Traditionally, fika can also be a coffee party with a fika menu of at least seven kinds of pastries, often more, and a table set with a tablecloth, napkins and special, fancy, coffee cups.

While nutritionists do have an interest in the meaning of "in-between-meal" snacks such as fika, admittedly, we have paid more attention to the nutritional quality than to other benefits of the fika break. For the hospitality industry, the fika phenomenon is of particular importance and the area has been immensely transformed during the last thirty years in Sweden, looking at ingredients' quality and taste as well as the presentation and design of the meal as such.

From a sustainability perspective, fika, as it is typically practiced, may contribute to "Good Health and Wellbeing" (United Nations General Assembly, 2015), but also to equality, inclusion and diversity. However, we may also consider environmental aspects and pay attention to how the ingredients have been produced and where; including factors such as whether they have been produced in an organic and sustainable fashion, and whether the work environment of those producing the ingredients measure up to agreed-upon criteria of sustainability (Rieckmann, 2017). A better understanding of these aspects will contribute to superior competencies and meaning-making practices among restaurant practitioners. The nutritional quality and the sustainability of the fika ingredients can of course be studied in collaboration with other disciplines.

In order to study the effects of fika on health and wellbeing in a broader sense, we need to collaborate with the social sciences as well as with the humanities, while the cultural meaning and design of the fika meal also needs more research. Methods of ethnography (Le Moal et al., 2021), time use research or practice theory are likely to be helpful. There are of course limitations to a national practice such as Fika, as it can be hard to generalize about how this practice is performed, and here we are most interested in to get more understanding on its underlying means. There is also a question on how understanding on Fika can be transferable to other cultures around the world. Although there are other similar in between-meal practices such as the Japanese the ceremonies and the English afternoon tea, from which we could learn both from similarities and differences.

A recent article on commensality calls for more research on "… commensality research as a topic by itself or used to unveil different dimensions of social relations between people, as well as interactions between humans and material objects" (Jonsson et al., 2021). Our discussion piece is meant to inspire and trigger research collaboration on how a simple meal, fika, consumed, together, may contribute to sustainable health and wellbeing.

Author statement

Conceptualization AY, Study design AY/HS/SA, Validation AY/HS/, Writing – original draft AY/HS/SA, Writing – review and editing AY/HS/SA.

Implications to gastronomy

This study focus on how commensality or eating together can contribute to competence and knowledge on the relation of 'in-between meals' such as Swedish fika relates and is of importance for gastronomy. Our attention is to emphasise on the Swedish fika break, an in-between meal of particular significance in Sweden, especially from a commensality perspective.

Having a fika or taking a coffee together can be studied from several different angles, partly as social practice, consumption, but also from the perspective of health or nutrition, but the common factor is that it falls under the gastronomic umbrella.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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