



# Back into the future? Senses of family food among millennials experiencing transition to adult life

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There is something seemingly awkward when we intend to study family food and related practices in the daily life of young adults. At a first glance, it seems that we are

trying to mix two completely different and opposing worlds. On the one hand, family food remembers something from the past, embedded in tradition and made of manual and time-consuming tasks. Contemporary youth, on the contrary, is associated immediately with the future and technology. This is especially true with Generation Y, the millennials or IGen, a range of different expressions broadly used to designate the individuals born between the 1980s and the beginning of the 21st century. This entry briefly explores senses of family food among millennials in Portugal and is based on the preliminary findings from a small-scale, qualitative study. The ultimate goal of our post is to stimulate a lively and creative reflection among the RC06 ISA members across the world on the relations between family and cooking practices.

### **Millennials are all about the future**

Despite the limitations associated with the frontiers distinguishing different generations, the scientific literature, and sociology in particular, has been mapping important differences between the millennials and previous generations. Moreover, thanks to globalization, the characteristics of this generation seem to be more similar between countries and across regions of the world than those of any other generation. Throughout their growth, the millennials were marked by events with importance and repercussion experienced on a global scale such as September 11 attack on the World Trade Center, the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Asian Tsunami or the economic-financial crisis of 2007-2008.

Globally, millennials are characterized as having grown up in a culture that values children and childhood as a key stage of life, away from work and household chores. Being a child, they were the center of attention at home and school, with parents and educators doing everything in their power for their happiness and success. As the relation with the digital world is a key characteristic of this generation, socialization agents multiplied beyond family and school. Technology is inseparable from their lifestyles. The millennials are also called digital natives as they grew up with computers, the Internet and mobile phones, always facing their constant and continued technological advances. Having grown up with Google, YouTube, Wikipedia, they connect their lives with the surrounding world through social media, like Facebook and Twitter, among others. Sending and receiving information instantly and especially 'sharing' are only some of the multiple faces of the ubiquity of computers and other digital devices and media in the academic, work and personal life.

What does this have to do with cooking practices, at home?

## **Cooking at home seems to be a thing from the past**

Recent and inspiring literature regarding the millennials comes to revolutionize everything we thought we knew about young people's cooking practices. Although it is a very educated and busy generation, many of them spend time cooking and eating at home. The fact that this is mostly because they like it and not because they feel it is an obligation, or because they have no money to go out puts food and the cooking practices at the center of the millennials' lifestyles.

Social media plays a crucial role in shaping and sharing food experiences. Many millennials comment their own or other's food, share photos of dishes in the main platforms they use, upload or search for recipes, textually and visually in web pages, blogs and forums, and more recently through the form of video contents and channels, for instance on YouTube.

Consistent with the broader consumption trends, when the millennials cook, they make use of experiments and strong personalization. They look for the different and want to get out of the routine, try novel recipes, and often bring in new or mix unused ingredients. Moreover, concerns about a healthy, balanced diet and environmentally responsible food are also visible in their choices regarding food practices, and cooking in particular.

If the millennials are so different from the previous generations, it is worth to study their world of food, related consumption practices and meanings. What, where and when they eat, how, with whom, and why they eat specific food products? What is the family role in shaping their food practices?

### **Into the millennials' kitchen...**

Having these questions as a backdrop, we conducted a qualitative exploratory study with millennials in Portugal. In a first phase, individuals were asked to construct food diaries. The photographs from their main meals during one week were privately shared through WhatsApp with the researchers, and in a second phase, a semi-structured interview was conducted. Data were collected from a total of 22 highly-educated individuals, both Portuguese and Spanish men and women with age under 35 years. All individuals were experiencing transition into adulthood; they all have been out of their parents' house for at least three months, living alone or sharing a house (e.g. with a partner or friends).

Literature shows that the transition to adulthood greatly influences food choice

behavior, and independent living is a key-moment in shaping food practices. On the one hand, it involves (new) responsibility for various food-related activities, such as budgeting, purchasing, preparation, cooking and serving. On the other hand, away from their parents' house, individuals have to decide on their own what to eat, when, where, how and with whom.

### **The table is set**

Preliminary findings of the collected data suggest that half of the observed individuals cook their own meals, although in different ways and weigh regarding eating out, frozen or instant meals.

Individuals who frequently cook at home, look for either different recipes or homemade traditional dishes, usually cooked by their parents when they all lived together in the family of origin. Among the arguments that were identified as criteria for including these in their current diet, the millennials frequently indicated their interest in continuing to make and consume the homemade and traditional dishes they ate before becoming independent. There are several reasons for this choice. They want to enjoy the food and flavors they are accustomed to, but traditional food is also associated with healthy food. In addition, traditional food brings emotional memories and unites millennials with their family of origin.

Other reasons to choose the current diet include the choice for satisfying, fresh, little seasoned foods, products of easy and quick preparation, with a good aesthetical presentation on the plate and being in good value for money.

When preparing homemade traditional dishes, the main source of culinary learning is not the Internet or well-known master chefs, but the family. While generally the Internet is used to learn how to cook, looking for new recipes or clarifying complex elaborations, cooking homemade traditional food was learned at home, with their parents, during childhood and adolescence, mostly in a non-directed manner, through observation or with small instructions given in advance by the adults.

Many of the individuals remember that during the childhood they started to cook out of curiosity or the need, when their parents were working or away from home and they had to prepare something to eat. Later in their lives, after leaving their parents' home, some of the millennials received cooking help from their families. The parents taught them the basics of cooking so that they could "defend themselves" in a new, unknown environment.

Differently from previous generations, the millennials are not simply repeating a recipe

passed down by their parents when cooking homemade traditional food. Traditional recipes are adapted and personalized according to the values that generally shape the millennials' diet and consumption practices, namely, ideas on healthy, aesthetics, and creativity. For this reason, cooking practices among the millennials seem to be a matter of returning to the past yet with the hands – and senses – in the future.

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