



How Cultural Perceptions and Food Preparation Affect Westerners View of Insects as Food.

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Abstract

There has been a recent push to encourage westerners to introduce insects into their diets. Traditional arguments that stress environmental and nutritional benefits have been largely unsuccessful. This not because people simply find insects distasteful; what people view as an acceptable food choice is culturally dependent, and foods made from novel and unfamiliar ingredients or tools are met with apprehension. What is less known is why insects are viewed as an unacceptable food source in western society. It has been suggested that westerners disgust towards insects is that insects are perceived of as contaminants and as vectors of disease. If westerners are unwilling to eat insects, or food prepared with insects because they are viewed as unhygienic, then we should expect individuals who are less concerned with hygiene to be more willing to eat insects, or food prepared with insects. When surveyed on their hygiene and their willingness to try food prepared using insects, participants that were less concerned with personal hygiene were more willing to eat food made with insects. In order to convince people to introduce insects into their diet one must know why people are so unneager to consume insects.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to determine if westerners aversion to consuming food prepared with insects is due to a cultural perception of insects being contaminants and vectors of disease.

Questions, Hypotheses, and Predictions

Question: Why are westerners so unwilling to introduce insects into their diets despite the benefits to their health and the environment?

Hypothesis: If westerners are unwilling to eat insects, or food prepared with insects because they are viewed as unhygienic, then we should expect individuals who are less concerned with hygiene to be more willing to eat insects, or food prepared with insects.

Prediction: That participants that are less hygienic will be more willing to eat food prepared with insects.

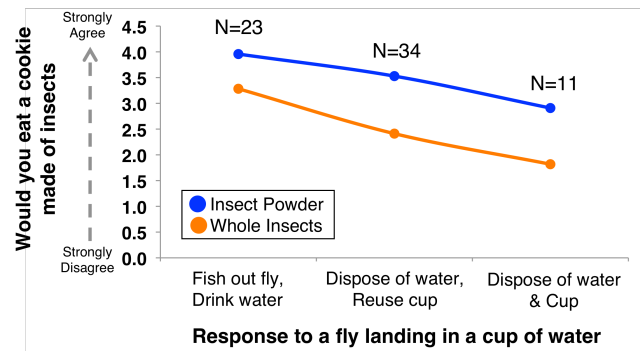


Methods and Experimental Design

Two identical surveys, composed of questions relating to personal hygiene, openness to trying new things, and willingness to consume insects were conducted. Survey questions were constructed with the help of Dr. Spencer Wood and used to capture respondent habits without explicitly asking "How clean are you." Moreover, respondents were asked to rate their feelings on each question on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). One survey was giving out to willing participants in the Student Union, another was given out to a class of entomology students. The averages for all questions were compared statistically between the surveys and found not to differ. Therefore, the responses were combined into a single analysis.

Results

According to the survey, students who were less concerned with personal hygiene were more likely to try foods prepared with insects than students that were more concerned with hygiene. Also students were more willing to consume cookies made with insect protein powder than cookies made with whole insects.



Questions used in above analysis:

- I would eat a cookie made with insect protein powder 1 2 3 4 5
- I would eat a cookie made with whole insects 1 2 3 4 5
- You're drinking a cup of water and, as you're about to take a drink, you see a fly land in the water. Do you...
 - Fish out the fly and then drink the water
 - Dispose of the water, but reuse the cup
 - Dispose of the water and cup
 - Drink the water, despite there being a fly in it

Conclusions

Westerners aversion to insects is based on ingrained cultural perceptions that insects are contaminants and vectors of disease. This disgust is triggered simply by the knowledge of insects being present in their food, and is stronger felt when the insects are more prominent or apparent, as was the case with eating cookies with whole insects. Westerners who are less concerned with personal hygiene are more likely to consume food made with insects than those who are more concerned with personal hygiene, and all westerners are more likely to eat food where the insects are less prominent or "hidden".

Future Directions

The next step should be to see what forms insect-based ingredients in food could take that would be more palatable to westerners. The survey questions should involve survey questions that describe preparation methods that would have an effect of sterilizing the food or disassociate the ingredients from the insects they are derived from. If a form or method can be found that hygiene concerned westerners would find palatable can be found, then it will be much easier to introduce insects to the western palate.

References

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