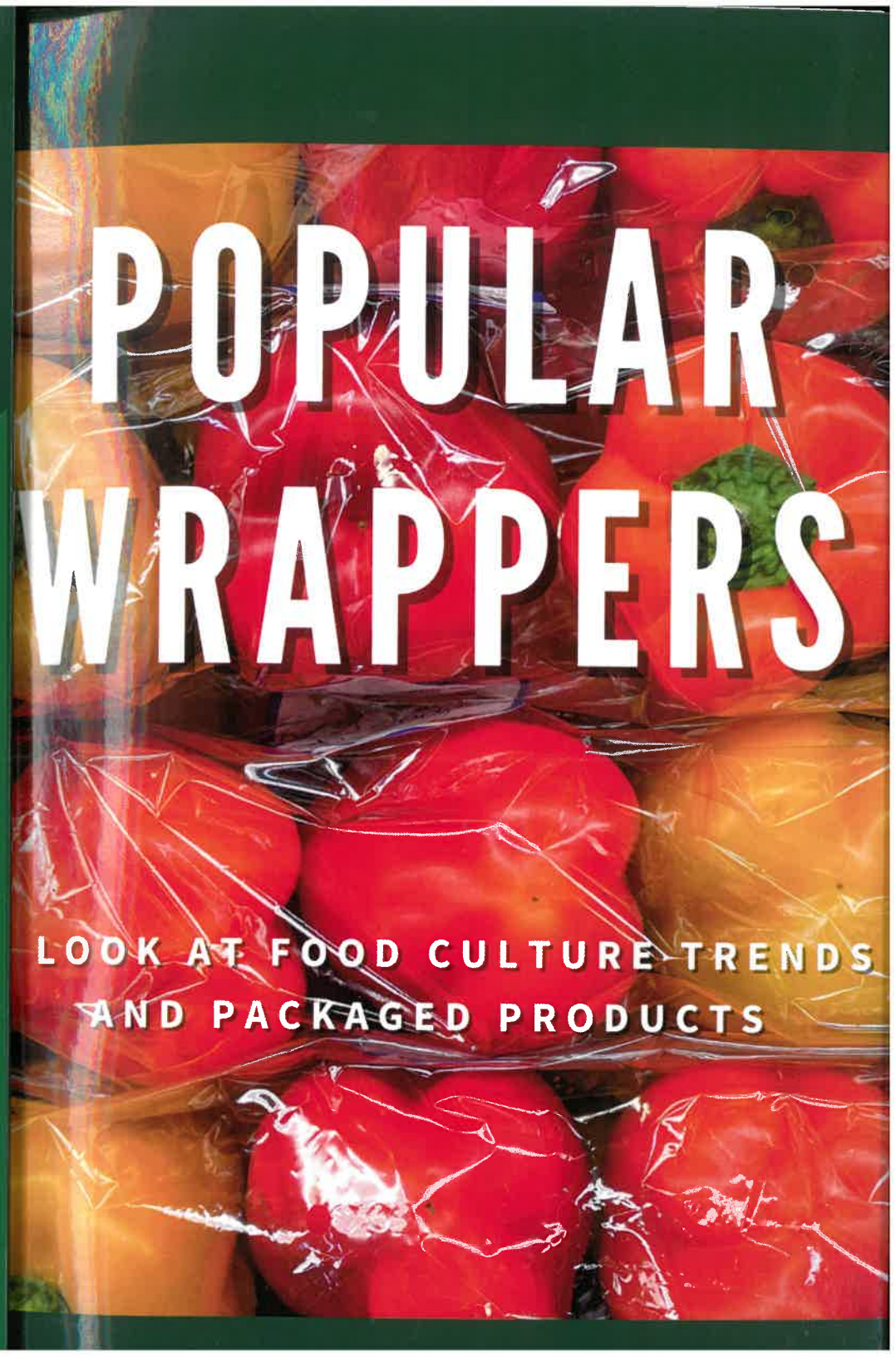


POPULAR WRAPPERS:

A Look at Food Culture Trends
and Packaged Products

Food is essential to life. Eating habits, consumer trends, access to food products, mealtimes, cooking habits, and lifestyle differences all play a role in how a society develops and exists within a food culture. Food packaging is an often overlooked piece of food culture but significantly influences how a culture consumes, perceives, and interacts with food products. Packaging impacts buying decisions, views on eating, and relationships with food in a significant way, shaping how and where people eat.

Popular Wrappers examines the relationship between food culture and food packaging and takes a look at specific food packaging technologies and techniques, aspects of food culture, the history of the food packaging industry, timelines of consumer food trends, and the serious environmental issues stemming from food and food packaging waste.



POPULAR WRAPPERS

**LOOK AT FOOD CULTURE TRENDS
AND PACKAGED PRODUCTS**

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A Look at Food Culture Trends
and Packaged Products

Melanie Roberge

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Image 1. Bright and colorful food packaging is everywhere in supermarkets and grocery stores across the United States. Various packaging materials, visuals, images, designs, color schemes, and keywords are used to attract consumers and influence buying decisions.

of the food product and packaging materials. The main functions of packaging materials are to achieve preservation and the safe delivery of food products until consumption. Throughout distribution the quality of the food product can deteriorate physically, biologically, and chemically. Most food products deteriorate in quality due to moisture absorption, oxygen invasion, flavor loss, unwanted odor absorption, and the migration of packaging components into the food. Traditional thermal processes have offered major developments in the food processing industry including commercial sterilization, quality preservation, shelf life extension, and safety enhancement. Many developments within packaging technologies have been commercialized, as new packaging techniques are created to ensure safety, lack of toxicity, and to extend the shelf life of the product (Han 3).

Food packaging is not just the box of a product. It is every layer, piece, and element of the food product that helps serve these roles. The majority of food packaging in the United States and other large countries uses metals, glass, paper, and polymers (conventional plastic), or a combination of multiple materials. The functions of a package depend on the chemical composition and the physical properties of the materials. Starting with the least used material to the most abundant materials used today, each popular material offers advantages and disadvantages as a means of packaging.

Metal containers offer mechanical strength, impermeability to mass transfer and light, good thermal conductivity, and resistance to high temperatures. Tin and aluminum are the most used among metal packaging materials, often found in cans and foils, but not always as cost effective as other available packaging materials. Glass as a packaging material offers advantages such as transparency, inertness, impermeability, rigidity, and thermal resistance (when properly heated). Although glass as a material has a relatively high general consumer appeal given the ability to see the actual product, some of its disadvantages include the fragility and weight of the material (Berk 625). Paper is the second most widely used material, as it was one of the earliest food packaging materials and one of the easiest to produce. The main advantages of paper as a packaging material are its low cost,

later in the 1970s, designed to extend products shelf life, initially focusing on meats and fish, later being made available for a wide range of foods. In the 1970s, PET plastic packaging was synthesized and by the 90s it was rapidly replacing glass bottles and cans and being regarded as a packaging success story across the globe. Opening the floodgate for the economy of bottled water as well as many other products, PET increased profits and created major shifts in consumer practices (PET Resin Association “An Introduction to PET”). Along with using new materials, new techniques were developed to improve food preservation and shelf life to prevent food from going bad. Oxygen scavenging sachets were designed to help with preservation and retort pouches began to further change the game in the 1980s, designed to be portable and lightweight, but allowed for foods to be frozen or heated up. Originally invented by the United States Army in the early 60s to replace the cans in military combat rations, these plastic and metal bags began to gain commercial traction as they were easy to use and save food with the same great taste (US Department of Agriculture “Shelf-Stable Food Safety”).

While the physical materials and packaging techniques used in the food packaging industry continued to change throughout the end of the twentieth century, how people used and interacted with new food and packaging products dramatically transformed as well. Safety became a major concern after an incident in 1982 when cyanide-laced capsules of Extra-Strength Tylenol killed seven people in the Chicago area. This triggered a surge of tamper-evident packaging and seals being added to packaging that are now regulated by the Food and Drug Administration and are included in most packaging today. A tamper-evident package, according to the regulations of the Food and Drug Administration “is one having one or more indicators or barriers to entry which, if breached or missing, can reasonably be expected to provide visible evidence to consumers that tampering has occurred” (Pierce “Timeline”).

As packaging technologies advanced, exterior design aspects were also changing. In 1984 the Food Marketing Institute endorsed the “sell by” and “best if used by” systems in response to consumers’ desire for open dates so they would be educated about the freshness of the

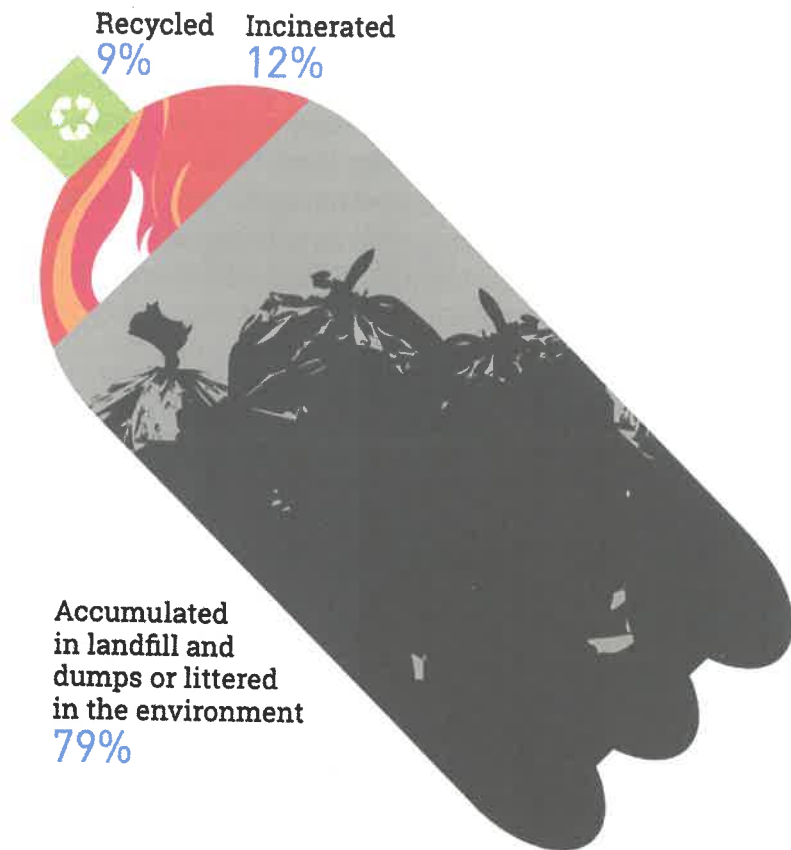


Image 4. Aseptic packaging is very popular among dairy products such as boxed milk. This method of packaging makes the product shelf-stable for longer and without refrigeration.

Image 5. This packaging container has multiple regulated safety features, like the twist cap and safety ring assuring consumers the product has not been tampered with. The “Best If Used By” dating system is convenient for those who are selling, stocking, buying, and consuming the product.



Disposal of all plastic waste ever generated (as of 2015)



SOURCE: Geyer, Roland et al. "Production, use, and fate of all plastics ever made." *Science Advances*, July 2017.

Fig 1. The world produces 400 million tons of plastic every year, only 9% of which is recycled. As for the other 91%, so far 12% of it has been incinerated and the remaining 79% was dumped into landfills or the environment.

Plastic Production

Plastic plays such a significant role in our lives yet both the production and disposal of the material continue to contribute to alarming amounts of land, ocean, and air pollution and a slew of other environmental and personal health issues. Northeast Asia and North America combined produce about half of the world's single-use plastic production (United Nations Environment Programme 4). Single-use plastics, most commonly used for plastic packaging, are intended to be used only once before they are thrown away or recycled. Most plastics do not biodegrade, but instead photodegrade, meaning that they slowly break down into small fragments known as microplastics. At the end of its lifetime, a product or packaging is recycled, incinerated, landfilled, dumped in uncontrolled sites, or littered throughout the environment. Because these materials are so prevalent in our everyday lives people aren't always aware of how much plastic is being wasted and put back into the environment, or the severity of the combined physical waste and production pollution.

An abundance of physical plastic waste in the environment presents significant hazards to wildlife both on land and in the oceans. Turtles and dolphins choke and die due to mistaking plastic bags for jellyfish, one of their main food sources. There is emerging evidence that the toxic chemicals added to plastic packaging during the manufacturing process transfer from the ingested plastic into the fish's or other animals' tissues, and eventually enter the food chain for humans as well (United Nations Environment Programme "BeatPlasticPollution"). Other human health concerns stem from the minimal regulations on what materials and chemicals can be used or included in packaging for food products. There has been a recent increase in consumer and legislative discussion surrounding acceptable food packaging materials, and some action is being taken to phase out the use of toxic PFAS chemicals in food packaging. Exposure to certain PFAS have been linked to a number of serious adverse health effects including testicular and thyroid cancers, thyroid disease, liver damage, increased cholesterol, asthma, and fertility issues. PFAS are often used to make packaging materials grease and water-resistant,



Image 8. Individually wrapped, on-the-go food and snack products are extremely common in everyday American food culture, supermarkets, and convenience stores across the country.



Image 9. Companies market products to children by using colorful brands and TV characters to attach a child's love for a show or movie to the food company's product in hopes of increasing sales and consumption.

to make their products known, and when done correctly it can have almost as much impact as the quality of the product itself.

More recent trends show millennials and other generations driving an increase in healthy eating, on-the-go consumption, and specialty food items (Cuneo "The Culture of Food"). The rise of health and diet trends exploded the market for individually wrapped granola or power bars, protein shakes, smoothies, and coffees designed as pre or post workout snacks. While many health concerned individuals strive to commit to living a more active lifestyle and eat more plant based, home cooked meals, fast-paced days almost require on-the-go eating and packaged foods. Fitness Journal articles highlight recent trends and updates in the food packaging industry and fitness industry, emphasizing the increase in consumption of packaged foods. Journalists write for these consumers and acknowledge this shift towards health and nutrition awareness being influenced by the increase in digital access and ready access to information (Williams "Packaged Foods"). While this increase in nutrition information can be good news for fitness professionals and consumers, packaged foods are not always the healthiest for the consumer or the environment. Environmental impacts and views are not often considered in the fitness or health foods industry, and most media and marketing surrounding these products focus on convenience. However, current trends such as the rise in healthy eating and the recent increase in environmental concern, does allow for companies to capture this audience with eco-friendly packaging, organic products, and creative branding. The drive for these demographics to make more health-conscious decisions and promote bettering themselves often lead to bettering the environment as well.

Company Innovations

Many companies are making smaller efforts and phasing out some of their wasteful habits and products, or replacing them with new more sustainable innovations or practices. In 2018 Starbucks committed to phasing out plastic straws by 2020, by replacing their

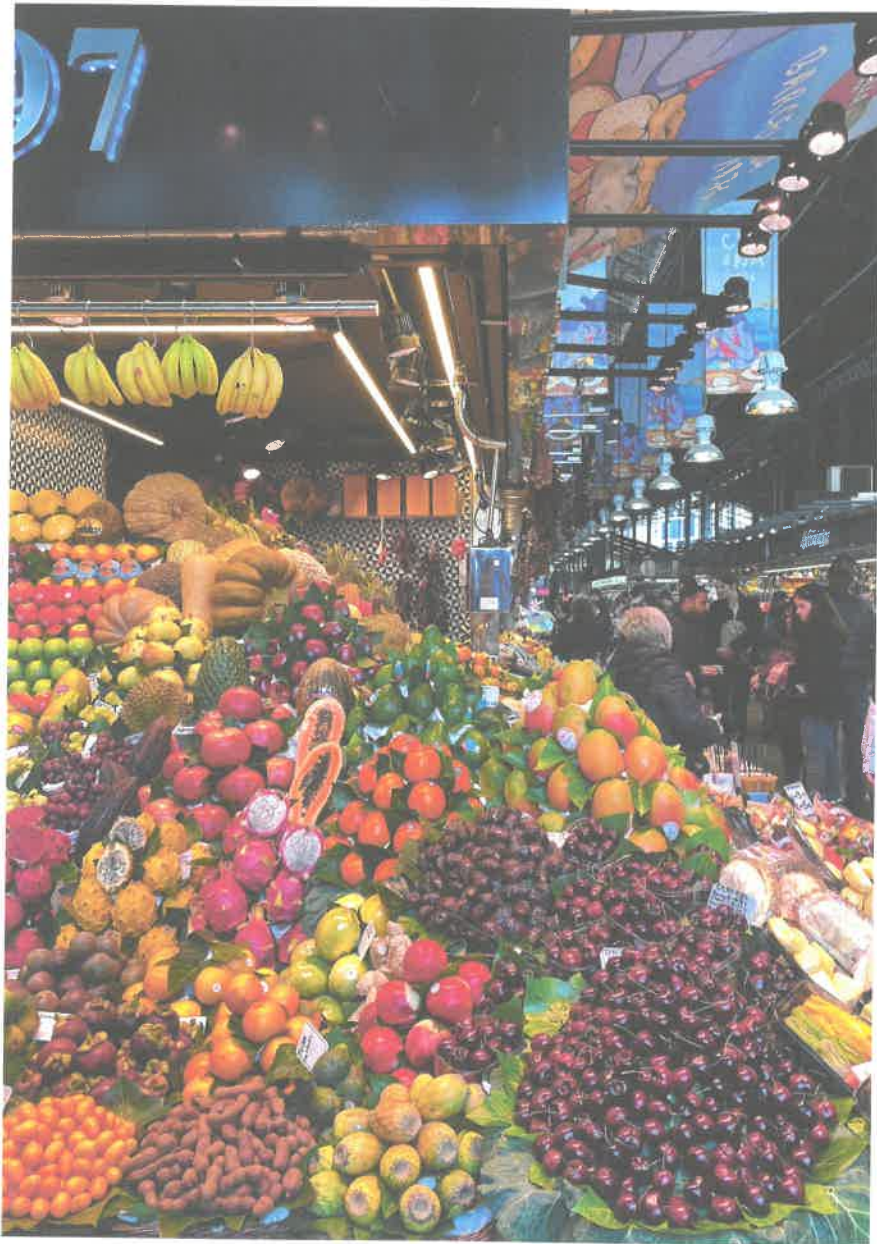


Image 11. Traditional markets are a significant element of Spanish food culture. La Boqueria is a large public market in the Ciudad Vieja district of Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain. The famous market serves as a popular tourist attraction as well as supplies a diverse selection of goods and produce.

bakeries, and fruit vendors play in the Spanish food shopping experience reflects their social ways of life. It is also essential to highlight the importance of the role women play in the preservation of Spanish food culture. In the above Shopping Habit's survey, women reported being in charge of most of the food shopping activities and are often main supporters in preserving their country's dietary habits (Achón et al. 1). How Spaniards get their groceries and cook independently are also heavily influenced by their culture surrounding mealtimes and food consumption.

Packaging Culture & Environmental Impacts

Spain has been a member of the European Union (EU) since 1986 and follows all EU directives, regulations, and obligations. Like the United States, the EU has made similar progress towards amending the General Food Law, requiring more transparency and comprehension communication, and strengthening the governance of the European Food Safety Authority. Generally, the European Union has claimed to value and address the importance of environmental issues, climate change, and sustainability within the EU. The European Commission website claims, "EU policy protects the environment and seeks to minimise risks to climate, human health and biodiversity. The European Green Deal aims to make Europe the world's first climate-neutral continent, in part by developing cleaner sources of energy and green technologies." In 2019 the European Union Parliament voted to ban single-use plastic items including straws, food containers, and cotton bud sticks to tackle marine litter and encourage sustainable alternatives. The Single-Use Plastics Directive will ban products for which alternatives exist on the market, such as single-use plastic cutlery, plates, and items made of biodegradable plastics, in July 2021. EU member states will also have to achieve a 90% collection target for plastic bottles by 2029 (European Union Parliament "Press Releases"). According to the survey results conducted by Ipsos, a UK market research company, in 2020, almost 40% of Spaniards believed that global warming or climate change is one of the top three environmental issues facing Spain, followed by waste management (36%) and air

CHAPTER 7

JOURNEY THROUGH JAPANESE FOOD CULTURE

Washoku: Diet & Food Culture

Japanese dishes and food culture are respected and admired across the world of gastronomy and food lovers. The Japanese traditional diet and dietary cultures even have a name: Washoku. Washoku is a practice based on a set of skills, knowledge, practices, and traditions related to the production, processing, preparation and consumption of food. In 2013, Washoku was named in the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO “Washoku”). Principles of Washoku include meals consisting of a staple food, rice, that is complemented by a variety of side dishes, including soup, fish, vegetables, and soybean. Many meals rely on the use of umami. Umami, meaning “essence of deliciousness” in Japanese, is independent from the four traditional basic tastes (sweet, sour, salty and bitter), and is often described as the meaty, savory taste that deepens flavor and characterizes many traditional Japanese foods (Gabriel et al. 1).

The practices of Japanese dietary culture are equally unique and important to their overall food culture. Meals are customarily eaten using chopsticks, portion sizes tend to be smaller than in other countries, and the visual presentation of food is an art form with great

attention for even the smallest details. Meals are regularly shared in the home, workplaces, and schools, where basic knowledge and skills of Washoku are passed down and taught through both formal and informal education and practice. Shokuik, meaning “food education”, is a part of the national Japanese school curriculum. Every child is taught about the process of growing, cooking, and sharing food in a community. In Japanese culture, respect is a major theme practiced throughout various aspects of life that bleeds into their food culture and eating habits. They value and appreciate food and learn to never waste food, have structured mealtimes and behaviors, and to make eating a slow, ritualistic event or occasion. Random snacking or grazing is overall frowned upon and eating etiquette is valued. Children are taught not to grab food, to wait to be served, and to eat without comment or complaint but to feel gratitude for every bit of food on their plates (Gross-Loh 64). A Japanese meal is eating, art, socializing, and communicating.

Madison Emery, a former high school English teacher who lived and taught in Tokyo for a year, has the experience of being immersed in Japanese food culture after being raised in the United



Image 12 & 13. Traditional Japanese diet consists of many soup, vegetable, sushi, and fish dishes. Meal presentation is a notable piece of Japanese food culture and sets them apart. Appreciation for art and design is common in many aspects of Japanese culture.

Photos taken by Adrianna Gomez