

# LOCUS OF SOCIAL CONTROL AND FOOD PREFERENCES

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## *Introduction*

In her cookery book, which was first published in 1887, O.A. Corver, headmistress of the contemporary Amsterdam Cooking School, recommended the use of dried legumes because of their abundance of protein and salts and for their starch content<sup>1</sup>. She was, however, of the opinion that a sufficient amount of fat and some extra starch should be added for proper nourishment. Later research proved that legumes are equally important as a source of B-vitamins, iron and fibre and this knowledge was also disseminated<sup>2</sup>.

Nevertheless, in the Netherlands consumption of dried legumes has decreased since 1900. Even in the north eastern region of the country, where legumes used to be a very common item on the bill of fare. We decided that this was a good reason to conduct a field study in order to try and discover the causes underlying that decrease in this area.

## *Design of research*

In his article 'Möglichkeiten ethnohistorischer Nahrungsforschung', Günther Wiegelmann pointed out that in ethno-historical research foods should be considered non-material culture goods, because of their short span of life, which implies that the quality of our knowledge of historical food habits depends on the quality, and respectively the shortcomings, of human memory. As a consequence a researcher of former food habits will encounter such phenomena as forgetting; failing to understand and distortion of reality amongst his respondents<sup>3</sup>.

Because our chief concern was the manner in which legumes were served at dinner we, too, had to conceive of legumes as non-material culture goods.

With this in mind we decided to use the open, tape-recorded interview. In order to boost the memories of our respondents we bought with us a basket of different varieties of seed legumes and a list of topics to be raised during the interview.

Our research was carried out in Noordbroek, a community we were familiar with and a location for an earlier research project<sup>4</sup>. Thus, we were able to choose as our respondents a close-knit network of thirty one individuals who were blood-relatives, in-laws, friends of long standing, of farmers' stock or agricultural labourers. Twenty one persons were part of this network's nucleus of farmers' families, whereas the position of the other nine was at its fringe. However, each person had either been born in this community and had been living here for at least twenty years or had moved into this area upon his/her marriage twenty or more years ago.

With their ages varying between 30 and 93 years, our respondents' collective recollection of food habits in Noordbroek covered, in fact, the entire period between 1900 and 1986.

<sup>1</sup> Corver, O.A., *Aaltje, Nieuw Nederlandsch Kookboek* (1887, uitg. Van Goor en Zonen, Den Haag, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> Nutrition Education Bureau, *Peulvruchten meer dan bonen alleen* (Brochure no.122, Den Haag, 1e druk z.j.)























<sup>3</sup> Wiegelmann, G., 'Möglichkeiten ethnohistorischer Nahrungsforschung', *Ethnologia Europea*, vol.1, 1976b, pp.185-94

<sup>4</sup> Edema, J.M.P., *Een sociaal-geografische beschrijving van de gemeente Noordbroek*, Bachelor of Science extended essay Social Geography, University of Utrecht, 1947.












table 1 COMPOSITION OF HOUSEHOLDS DURING DINNER TIME (in numbers)

	up to +1920	+1920 - +1955	after +1955
nuclear family	2 - 6	2 - 5	2 - 5
personnel (permanent)	3 - 4	0 - 1	-
personnel (harvest-time)	6 - 10	2 - 10	-
kin or friends (harvest-time)	-	-	2 - 3
total	11 - 20	4 - 16	4 - 8

table 2. STANDARD WEEKLY BILL OF FARE (+1920)

DAY	ENTRÉE	MAIN COURSE	DESSERT
SUNDAY		POTATOES RED CABBAGE STEWED PEARS CARROTS ETC.	  
MONDAY		b. YELLOW PEAS var. STRAWYELLOW or RUNNER BEANS e. WHITE BEANS	 
TUESDAY		b. POTATOES + CABBAGE / KALE var. ... + WAXPODS var. WAXPODS PLAIN	 
WEDNESDAY		b. POTATOES 1 VEGETABLE var. FABA BEANS A POTATO	 
THURSDAY		b. POTATOES + PARSNIPS / TURNIPS var. STRAWYELLOW BEANS	 
FRIDAY		b. POTATOES + SHREDDED RUNNER BEANS (salted)	 
SATURDAY		b. DRY PEAS var. STRAW YELLOW BEANS e. WHITE or RUNNER BEANS	 

## LEGEND

	SOUP
	HOTCHPOTCH
	MEAT
	HAM
	PORK
	FRIED DICED BACON or SUET + THE FAT
	BLACK RYE BREAD WITH PORK
	BUTTER (RENDERED)
	PUDDING
	PORRIDGE
	PANCAKES WITH MOLASSES

N.B. According to a labourer's wife, in her parental home vegetables were never served together with potatoes; this was before her marriage in 1946. At best her mother would serve stewed onions or shallots which replaced vegetables as well as gravy.

*Food legumes and the bill of fare of 1920*

Analysis of the collected data showed beyond doubt that legumes related food habits were formerly closely linked with the composition of the households during dinner-time (Table 1).

Well after World War I a farmer's wife would serve four tables during harvest time: one table for the family in the living room, one in the kitchen for the indoor servants, one table in the churn-hall for half the casual labour and the fourth in the field for the rest. The food was the same for everyone, because as one of our respondents put it, 'When you had to cook for so many people, you could not manage otherwise'<sup>5</sup>.

In order to save time and energy required for preparation of such huge quantities of food the Noordbroek housewife used to stick to a never-changing bill of fare, whether weekly, or annually (Table 2). She, moreover, served legumes three to five times a week, partly for the same reason.

The repertory for the standard bill of fare in the first quarter of the 20th century contained thirteen different meals with legumes in the main course. Three of those could well be classified as 'basic', six as 'a variation on a basic one' and four as 'extras'.

The rationale for the preponderance on the weekly bill of fare of meals with legumes and pork appeared to be threefold:

—'You had to feed so many people with large appetites'

—the working class family was not yet familiar with leaf vegetables and other fine vegetables<sup>6</sup>; these kinds of vegetables were therefore not very popular with them

—'You had to feed your personnel well; otherwise they would call you "Farmer of Hunger and Thirst" behind your back'.

In other words, it was especially the social control by the personnel which caused the frequency of legumes, particularly with pork, on the menu. The very same social control was also the reason why each interviewed housewife cooked every day and still does.

In between 1920 and 1950 the custom of serving dinner to the personnel gradually disappeared. The domestic servant became a daily and the labourer brought his own meal in his so-called little blue pail (a small blue enamelled pail with lid). Since that time the farmer's wife's only care was to heat these pails with their contents for the midday meal. Sometimes she did not even have to do this, because the wife or child of the labourer would drop off the pail at the farm before meal times, with the food already hot.

From this moment on the farmer's wife and all the labourers were theoretically in a position to exert social control on the meals cooked by labourer's wives. But it is by no means certain whether a farmer's wife would go any further than one female respondent who noted, 'You would occasionally look into these blue pails and sometimes you would be astounded that these meals were supposed to be sufficient for hardworking men'. Social control by one's fellow labourers was probably more noticeable, because they could see the contents of each other's pail quite clearly at dinner time. The number of labourers taking part in the interviews, however, was too small to provide us with any reliable information on this matter.

Whereas the above-mentioned social control took place during meal times, another form seemed to have occurred in the vegetable garden, as one of our respondents told us, 'My husband thought that anyone having a garden should grow runner beans and onions. But he did not even like onions himself so would not even let me add onions to the pea soup. As for me, salted runner beans did not agree with me, but I used them for hotch-potch; the days I served this food, I ate very little! Later one would can runner beans and serve them as a vegetable together with potatoes. Prepared in this manner they agreed with me, so I ate them. Later, after my husband's death my gardener used to plant broad beans in my garden. I never liked to eat them, but now I had to.'

Recollection by two other respondents point to a relationship between social control and social class. The father of a respondent used to have stomach trouble, 'So we rarely had yellow peas and brown beans'. Apparently this farmer's family could afford to deviate from the standard weekly bill of fare.

<sup>5</sup> This recollection was not shared by the labourers and their wives, for one respondent remarked somewhat resentfully, 'Whatever the farmer disliked was served to the labourers.' And one labourer mentioned with disgust the tasteless bean soup which was served in the field during harvesting.

<sup>6</sup> Until c.1940 farmers' wives considered red cabbage, beets and carrots fine vegetables. In fact, until this time a labourer's wife would have only red and white cabbage and kale at her disposal.

A labourer's family where the father also had stomach trouble came up with another solution, 'The skins of white hard-shelled beans are more tender than those of straw yellow ones and therefore my mother grew white beans, which my father ate without problems'.

#### *Food preferences till c.1930*

When the standard weekly bill of fare was a general custom there was little room for food preference. Usually each household held to its own selection of trimmings, such as pickles, molasses, vinegar, mustard and sugar. Our respondents could not remember whether as children they were ever asked whether they liked a food or not, they just had to eat it. Small wonder that, as a young housewife, one respondent was shocked when after a meal of yellow peas, the foreman rose from the table and said, 'This is the food I dislike most', because, she said, 'You had been taught to keep such thoughts to yourself'.

On the other hand, several respondents remembered clearly personal food preferences of either their father or mother. This is obvious, for in this case only, a certain food habit would not be imposed as a matter of course, which automatically happens with food preferences shared by the father and mother. Parental preferences were mostly related to the trimmings of the main course or the preparation of left-overs. We were told, for instance, that 'father used to pour milk over yellow peas/brown beans', or that 'he used vinegar on his waxpods'. And also that mother would use molasses/brown sugar on yellow peas' and that 'she would use any left-overs of yellow peas from the midday meal in her evening buttermilk porridge, because she loved that'. Sometimes father's preference was reflected in mother's recipes, 'Father did not like leeks or onions in the pea soup; so I never tasted soup with such vegetables before my marriage'. Sometimes the food preference of the mother in particular was instrumental in a particular food habit. This was for instance the case when she would grow a special variety of dry-shelled bean because 'they are more tender and tastier as well', or when she would stick to growing stringed double white beans longer than other farmers' wives, because 'these are larger and more tender and turn yellow a bit earlier than the stringless double white beans'. This respondent did so in spite of the fact that her children, who were also interviewed, remembered with disgust the many strings in the waxpods meals, especially in the waxpods hotch-potch.

#### *Allowances for food preferences*

Real allowances for food preferences in the actual bill of fare were made only after the personnel had stopped sharing meals with the farmer's family. Looking back on this development a respondent expressed this with the remark, 'This was the turning point. Your own taste and what did or did not agree with you began to take a much more important place'.

However, probably one innovation took place before that turning point was reached. One of our oldest respondents told us, 'In former days peas and pork were the only ingredients of the soup; as a little child you did not like this. Later on other ingredients, such as carrots and vegetables, were added to the soup, changing its taste'. With these additional ingredients the taste of the soup could be adjusted to the family's preference. However, our respondents remembered that only their parents' taste seemed to matter, in view of such remarks as, 'We did not have ... [onions, leeks, celery, etc.] ... in our pea soup, because my father/mother did not like these.'

As time went on pork lost its central place in the recipe of pea soup and black rye bread was no longer used as a trimming. These changes made for a variety of recipes, which makes it difficult to determine whether the preference of one of our respondents actually changed when he said, 'Pea soup used to be the food I disliked the most and now it is my favourite dish'. Maybe he just compared two different soups which had only one thing in common, the name 'pea soup', because his wife's recipe was quite different from the one his mother used. Not only the recipe for pea soup changed for that matter, but also the fact that it was no longer served at one and only one particular day of the week. There were, even, two more new developments. The first being the custom of ending an excursion or a special meeting with a meal of pea soup at a restaurant, 'where you can get delicious pea soup with all the trimmings: two kinds of pork, sausage, rye bread and mustard'. The second innovation was the fact that associations discovered a profitable way of making money by selling home-made pea soup to the villagers once every winter. So they made a tradition out of this knowledge.

Meanwhile, the frustrated food preferences of their youth caused several of our respondents to drop, as soon as possible, the waxpod beans, the yellow beans and/or the brown beans from the food repertory in their own households. Others did so because, 'We were told to use less fat, but these kinds of meal do not taste well without bacon or pork'.

People who were really fond of legume dishes sought for other solutions, such as eating them less frequently, substituting pork with butter sauce, tomato sauce, meat or sausages, or adding an extra side-dish,

such as onions and mushrooms or green peppers, 'but still the best way to serve legume dishes is with bacon or pork'. This brought a friend of one of our respondents to promote waxpod beans and pork for his special birthday meal and relations of someone else to celebrate New Year's Day with this very same meal.

Evidently the threefold campaign by the Nutrition Education Bureau against the excessive use of salt, fats and hotch-potch was translated in Noordbroek into 'no salted vegetables, no pork, no hotch-potch and no dried legumes'. The inclusion of legumes in this list is not as surprising as it seems, for two reasons. First, because of the fact that these legumes were a standard ingredient in pork dishes. And secondly, because legumes were considered to be equivalent to potatoes together with vegetables and that only main courses prepared with potatoes and a legume separately were considered an alternative to hotch-potch.

Consequently it became customary to use fresh or canned and later frozen vegetables and to use them in the so-called 'Dutch standard menu' consisting of 'potatoes — meat — vegetables and a dessert'. This finding testifies at the same time that the triumphal march of the potato really was a slow one in this part of the world.

On the other hand, the Nutrition Education Bureau was not successful with its introduction of new legume recipes. Even amongst our respondents who had been introduced to the 'chili con carne' dish as part of a 'Slimming Together' course, there was only one woman who had added this recipe to her repertory. In order to understand this fact, we may have to go back to research findings of Da Costa and Duister that their respondent-housewives did not really know what to do with miscellaneous legume recipes. These women were left with the question, 'How do you make this into a complete meal?'<sup>7</sup> Perhaps it was the same for the housewives in Noordbroek.

### *Conclusion*

If, by means of the above-mentioned data, we try to formulate an answer to our question, 'What was the cause for the decrease in legume consumption in Noordbroek during this century?', we arrive at more than one, namely:

—Social control by outsiders on food habits of the individual farmer's family was removed when personnel no longer had their meals at the farm.

—The above-mentioned development made room for the individual food preferences of, especially, the farmer and his wife.

—Because children were kept from indulging in their specific food preferences by their parents, they would give in to them as soon as they had the opportunity, which was as soon as they got married.

—Direct social control by personnel was replaced by a more indirect social control by the Nutrition Education Bureau.

And last, but not least:

—Nutritional messages with a negative purport came across to people, while positive information, such as new recipes, did not. It is impossible to give an answer to the question why positive information was not digested. It is nevertheless a question which deserves some serious investigation along the lines that recipes may have to fit into whole menus, the taste of which equals those of housewives' familiar repertories of meals.

<sup>7</sup> Da Costa Sr., R., and W. Duister, *Variëren met en vervangen doo peulvruchten in de maaltijd*. Dept. of Human Nutrition, Agr. University, 1986, undergraduate thesis no. 86-87.