CHAPTER 3

Fluctuations in Food Preferences

One of the first principles of food preferences is that disliked foods are always disliked regardless of the circumstances under which they are served. On the other hand, preferences for liked foods vary with conditions. Even those foods of which we are ordinarily very fond are not always liked or preferred. Under certain circumstances we find them highly unappealing and refuse to eat them. At other times, they are simply neutral and can be taken or left alone. Fluctuation and not stability is the rule rather than the exception in food preferences.

What accounts for fluctuations in food preferences, so that what we want today we didn’t want yesterday but may want again tomorrow? There are many possible reasons. Some have to do with changes within the individual, while others have to do with the characteristics of the foods or the conditions or circumstances under which they are served. Research has been concentrated on long-term preferences, thus relatively little is known about daily fluctuations. This is due partly to the confusion between preferences and selections. In most of our daily lives we eat foods not because of some strong preference for them but simply because they are there.

Context

We find rich brown gravy delicious over mashed potatoes, but it would be repulsive over ice cream. Nor would we like orange soufflé as a side dish for spaghetti and meatballs. Preferences are affected by the broad context or setting in which the food appears.

The way in which an object is perceived and even its meaning are determined, in part, by its context. Context refers to the setting in which a particular stimulus occurs. It is all the other stimuli present with the given object or stimulus. The context can be simple, consisting only of other lines as in the illusions shown above, or it can be complex and include the whole
physical and social setting. In perception, classic examples are the Hering and Muller-Lyer illusions shown in figure 3-1. In the Hering illusion, the vertical lines are straight and parallel, but they appear to bow outward because of the context of radiating lines. In the Muller-Lyer illusion, the horizontal lines are the same length, but they appear to be different because of the context of arrow heads and tails in which they occur.

Context can alter not only the physical appearance of stimuli but also their meaning. The role of context in the perception of personality traits was discussed earlier in connection with the familiarity-preference hypothesis. In social perception, a risqué story told at a party is amusing, but the same story told at a loved one’s funeral becomes gross and indecent, as does the person who tells it.

**Food Contexts**

The contexts for any item in a meal are all the other foods or food components present, the way in which the food is served, and all those other things that have to do with the actual service and setting. The ideas, thoughts, and feelings present with a particular food are also part of the context, and, like the radiating lines in the Hering illusion, they can alter the meaning and seeming taste of that food.

**Method of serving:** Different contexts are sometimes simply the different ways in which foods are prepared or served. Boiled or steamed rice served with butter and salt and pepper is a substitute for potatoes. The same rice, identical in flavor and texture, served with cream and syrup or whipped cream and fruit becomes a dessert. Even though the rice is the same, our perception of it is different because it is served in a different way. Crêpes filled with jelly and sprinkled with powdered sugar do not seem to be the same as crêpes filled with crabmeat and served with Mornay sauce. Fried and baked apples both have the sweet-sourness of apple, but one is served as a vegetable and the other as a dessert. Cheese and crackers served before a meal are an appetizer; after a meal they become an extra course.