

Food for Thought

Where does our food come from?

Most of us can provide little more of an answer than “from the grocery store.” Yet media headlines and public debates often emphasize pressing issues involving food, from eating disorders and mad cow disease to genetically modified food and threats of ecoterrorism. Increasingly, it has become difficult and even unwise to take for granted the foods that we eat.

Understanding our food sources raises many questions of national and global significance. How will rising petroleum costs affect the availability and cost of food? What is the impact of current farming practices on the environment? How do the cultural meanings we associate with food influence eating habits? Does the loss of small landholding farmers diminish the foundation of a democratic society?

Food-related issues are particularly salient in the local community, a region rich in agriculture as a way of life and a basis of the economy. For example, the shift toward industrial agriculture has made it difficult for family farmers to compete in the global marketplace; a number of Kenyon employees hold jobs at the College in order to provide the income necessary to keep their farms financially viable. As aging farmers sell out to developers, the cornfields and livestock pastures that mark a rural landscape soon give way to residential sprawl and strip malls.

Food for Thought is a special initiative to explore food, farming, and rural life. As the accompanying list of courses suggests, these subjects touch virtually every aspect of the curriculum. For students, taking several of these courses represents an opportunity both to enrich understanding and to forge the cross-disciplinary connections that are central to liberal education. Many of these courses offer the additional opportunity to engage the surrounding community through original scholarly and creative work, broadening students’ horizons beyond Gambier Hill and deepening their connection to this place.

Much of the work accomplished in these courses will contribute to an ambitious public project to build a sustainable market for foods produced in and around Knox County. Students and faculty are conducting research on local food supplies and consumer buying habits, developing a local food warehouse and retail outlet in Mount Vernon, and creating exhibits to raise public understanding about the many ways our food choices affect us as individuals and as a society.

For additional information about Food for Thought, visit the Kenyon Rural Life Center Web site at rurallife.kenyon.edu. To learn more about becoming involved in this initiative, contact Professor Howard Sacks, director of the Rural Life Center.

Courses

Each of these courses addresses themes relevant to Food for Thought. In some cases, the subject matter is central to the entire course; in others, it represents a distinct unit. Please refer to the brief description accompanying each listing, which notes the particular topics examined in the course. Complete course descriptions may be found in the listings for each department or program. For additional information, please contact the relevant faculty member. Independent study and summer research offer additional opportunities for academic work; see Professor Sacks for details.

Year Courses

Fieldwork: Rural Life

SOCY 477Y-478Y (1 unit)
Sacks

Students will conduct fieldwork throughout Knox County to examine the character of local food production, distribution, and access, and the relationship of local food production to the global food system.

First-Semester Courses

American Culture and the Environment

AMST 391 (.5 unit)
Britz

This course examines how our history has been shaped by the ways we approach and change our environment. One of the major patterns of change we explore is how farms and ranches continue to be a driving force in the radical reshaping of our landscape.

Anthropology of Food

ANTH 220 (.5 unit)
Murphy

Through cross-cultural comparisons, this course investigates the central role food plays in human biology and culture, including the effects of social, political, and economic issues on human nutrition.

Photography I

ARTS 106 (.5 unit)
Hackbardt

Students will work on food-related issues for a photography project.

Practical Issues in Ethics

PHIL 115 (.5 unit)
Xiao

Factory farming, vegetarianism, and the ecology of rural life are among the ethical issues discussed in the course.

Prophecy

RLST 382 (.5 unit)
Dean-Otting

This course will devote two sections to discussion of agribusiness and globalization and their impact on food, farming, and rural life both in America and abroad.

Second-Semester Courses

Photography I

ARTS 106 (.5 unit)
Hackbardt

Students will work on food-related issues for a photography project.

Solar Energy

CHEM 108 (.5 unit)
Cummings

Modern agricultural methods are heavily dependent on petroleum and natural gas; this course explores our global energy challenges, from fossil fuels to solar energy alternatives.

Environmental Economics

ECON 366 (.5 unit)
Corrigan

We will examine the economic rationale for agricultural practices and policies aimed at improving the quality of the environment and altering our use of natural resources.

Introduction to Environmental Studies

ENVS 112 (.5 unit)
Heithaus, Mauck

This course examines sustainable development, particularly sustainable agriculture, as an important component of our general investigation of

the effects of human population size on the environment.

Seminar in Environmental Studies: Capstone Seminar

ENVS 461 (.5 unit)
Fennessy

A portion of this class will be devoted to exploring patterns of changing land use, including the conversion of agricultural land to suburban and commercial development, and how this leads to a host of environmental effects, including loss of biodiversity, changes in soil quality, and a breakdown of the rural community.

Italian Cinema: Focus on Food

ITAL 392 (.5 unit)
Richards

The course considers the philosophical and psychological meanings, social customs, and historical situations associated with food in the Italian context as shown in film, with reference also to key literary works.

Sociology of Food

SOCY 292 (.5 unit)
Johnson

This course examines the social world we live in by examining what we eat, how we eat it, where we buy it, how much it costs, who prepares it, who produces it, and how.