

Preface

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In the Middle East, food is a very serious business indeed. Within the myriad of conflicting national identities and centuries-old ethnic loyalties, the kitchen provides the basic ingredients for defining the meaning of place and the complex interrelationship between center and periphery, in-groups and out-groups, localism and globalization. Discussion of food pertains to the ways by which gender holds massive influence over the creation of local, national and ultimately global collective identities. As food touches the most basic physical needs, on the one hand, while possessing high symbolic value, on the other hand, questions of food consumption and distribution are in the process of entering the center of research and theory today.

This was not always the case: the study of food and the socio-cultural systems which process it, alongside other symbols of “low” culture, were not considered worthy of “serious” research. This issue, edited by Nir Avieli and Rafi Groszlik of Ben Gurion University, shows how studying food can be a profitable way of understanding the power structures and deep transformations that affect the people of various regions—in this case the Middle East and mainly Israel, in all its rich diversity. It brings together different perspectives that analyze foodways and examines their complex interaction with other institutional fields.

The editors quote the saying that what you eat determines who you are. In a journal dedicated to questions of identities in a changing world, the issue of food needs to receive its appropriate place at the table.