



Limited-Service, Unlimited Possibilities

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Inspired by Rio? Here's a Look at Brazilian Dining Habits ^[1]

The eyes of the world are on Brazil as the Olympics in Rio de Janeiro continues to dominate headlines. But while much attention is being paid to the athletics, restaurants could benefit from giving Brazil's dining culture another look.

On the surface, Brazilians' dining habits appear to be more or less the same as those of Americans. But The Hartman Group's Melissa Abbott says there are in fact distinct differences.

Traditionally, the gap between different socioeconomic classes was so wide that few but the most affluent of Brazilians could afford to eat out with any frequency. Most would eat meals at home or grab a snack from street-food vendors.

"What we found was with a little bit more economic prosperity, they were able to afford eating out at restaurants, more akin to the way it's happening here in the U.S. Originally what they had availability for was street food," says Abbott, vice president of culinary insights at The Hartman Group. In 2012, she was among a team of ethnographers to travel to Brazil and study the country's eating habits.

While most Brazilians may be less likely to dine out than their American counterparts, when they do, the occasion is rarely plagued with regret.

"They don't tend to have as much guilt about snacking as we do here in the U.S.," Abbott says. "They love sweets, and sugar is something they're aware sugar of being not great for your health, but in a very, very different way. There's a lot of pride around sugar because it's a major crop."

She adds that for Brazilians, a person's outward appearance is often the best way to determine whether someone should indulge in a sweet. In this respect, it's a couple of decades behind the U.S., where many consumers make nutritious choices for their overall health rather than just physical results.

Abbott says Brazilians are also very keen to keep up with trends. As a new socioeconomic class emerges with a little bit more disposable income, consumers are eager to use it at certain fast-food chains like McDonald's or Subway, which have a certain cache.

"The one really interesting thing about Brazilian consumers is that they are very into following trends, and they want to know the latest, greatest thing that's going on," Abbott says. "If you're offering something that is not at least a little bit exciting or a little bit on the edge, they would probably be a little suspicious and not think it was that cool."

The importance of sharing food also extends to snack times. Abbott says it's not uncommon in the afternoon to see a number of people sitting together in the street with a snack and a drink.

Over the last decade, The Hartman Group has found that more U.S. consumers eat on the go or alone. But the sense that mealtimes are something special still endures in Brazil.

So while the U.S. might be ahead of Brazil in terms of its nutritional awareness, by Abbott's estimation, American consumers and restaurants could stand to adopt a more Brazilian attitude toward food. After all, when people dine together, they naturally have a better gauge for portion sizes.

"It's a very inclusive, social culture," Abbott says. "It helps with health and wellness in a very large way when there's that aspect of commensality present, which we're getting farther and farther away from in the U.S."

By Nicole Duncan

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