Food for thought: the cognitive science of eating
TuTh 9:30-10:45am
HU 111
Peter Todd

People spend a lot of time thinking about food—by some estimates, we make dozens to hundreds of food-related decisions per day. But how do we think about food? What are the ways we make these decisions, and how are they influenced and remembered and by what we’ve evolved to like or avoid? These are the types of questions that cognitive scientists, including psychologists, anthropologists, and behavioral biologists, ask about people’s thinking, and in this course we will apply the ideas and methods of cognitive science to the domain of eating behavior. We will look at how people learn about different foods and come to have particular preferences; how we remember what we’ve eaten and how that influences what we will eat in the future; how social influences affect our food choices; what factors make us eat more or less; and how we can influence our own decision making about food in healthy directions.

We will have a special emphasis this year on the campus-wide Themester topic of good behavior and bad behavior, looking at what this means in the context of eating (e.g., relating to health, being “green”, promoting fair trade, etc.), how we learn what is good or bad eating behavior through developmental experience and learning from parents and peers, how these categories differ across cultures, and how behavior can be shifted from the “bad” end of the spectrum toward the “good” end. We will have guest lectures by IU scholars including Richard Wilk (anthropology) on “moral balancing” regarding food (if you eat a good diet all week, does that give you the moral freedom to “pig out” on the weekend?) and Christine Barbour (political science) on how to shift people toward eating better in a sustainable sense. We will also have visits from outside experts coming to IU as part of the year-long Sawyer Seminar on Food Choice, Politics, and Freedom to discuss how the conversation about good and bad food choices plays out at the societal and governmental levels, and special film evenings with experts to discuss various aspects of good and bad food behavior.

The course will include weekly readings and discussions, participation in experiments related to food choice, writing short critical essays about these as well as a longer final research paper, and guest lectures and visits to local institutions related to thinking about food, showcasing the world-leading cognitive science program we have here at IU.