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 by what we’ve learned and remember 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 (psychology); how we look for food and remember where and what we’ve eaten (behavioral biology); how cultural and social influences affect our food choices (anthropology, network science); how we talk about food (linguistics); how our brain responds to food (neuroscience); what factors make us eat more or less and how we can change them to influence our own decision making about food in healthy directions (health applications).

We will have a special emphasis this year on the campus-wide Themester topic, “Eat, Drink, Think: Food from art to science.” We will talk about how thinking about food influences what and how much we eat and whether we enjoy it; we will also talk about how eating food affects our thinking (and not just through our brain—also through the bacterial “microbiome” in our gut!). We will hear from IU experts in food studies and food science about their own thinking on topics from “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?) to “flavor networks” in the dishes of different cultures (can we predict what ingredients go together in Asian vs. European cuisine?). And we will explore how people think about food through the art and artifacts they make, by watching food films at the IU Cinema and taking the food-themed tour at the IU Art Museum.

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 and food studies programs we have here at IU.

Books
Other readings will be distributed each week in class or online.