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The Food and Dietary Habits
of Belize

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Introduction

As the Belizean population is considered to contain a gumbo of cultures; so does the Belizean diet contain a gumbo of dietary aspects. In the true sense, gumbo is defined as a thickened soup or stew which is a combination of ingredients mixed together in the same pot and cooked in a liquid resulting in rich, thickened gravy. Like the origins of gumbo, which combines ingredients and culinary practices of several cultures, including French, Spanish, West African, and Native American (Choctaw); so is the demography of Belize with the exception of Mayan and Mestizo population instead of Native American. My research will study the Belizean food and dietary habits as compared to the United States to determine its affect on the population. My hypothesis is as follows: Since Belizean diet contains a variety of fresh meats, fruits and produce due to availability of such products because of its geographical location; the Belizean population as a whole has fewer health problems related to diet than the population of the United States who rely heavily on processed foods.

Materials and Methods

The materials needed for this research is quite simple. I opted to use an iPad for documentation; however any word processor or standard pen and paper would be sufficient for gathering and recording data.

The methods used to collect data consisted of personal interviews of native Belizeans at Sabun educational center including cooks, guides and workers as well as a sampling of the meals prepared at the center. In addition, I embarked on a side trip to Belmopan as recommended by our guide to obtain a sampling of food prepared in kitchens in the market square for businessmen and workers in the city. This is limited to lunch time which usually runs from about 11:00am-

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2:00pm. After lunch is done, the ladies that come to cook in these kitchens close and return home, so it is important to plan the trip during the normal lunch time. A side trip to a surrounding city will provide a truer perspective of actual foods prepared for locals on a daily basis.

It is easy to obtain information from sampling different cultures of Belize because the mixture of these cultures live and work together in a peaceful manner. You can easily see the respect for cultural differences while realizing that there is no ethnic or racial tension that is visible on the surface. Although there are three separate sectors or classes of society in Belize, signs of racism are not present. The interviews I conducted were with our guides from Mestizo heritage, the cooks who are Garangu and Creole heritage and townspeople in Belmopan whom are Guatemalans. It is noteworthy that all just consider themselves Belizean as we consider ourselves Americans.

A list of questions was prepared ahead of time to ensure consistency and uniformity. The questions used are as follows:

- 1.) Are there specific foods eaten at each meal?
- 2.) What is the staple food in your diet?
- 3.) What foods are eaten at a traditional breakfast?
- 4.) What foods are eaten at a traditional lunch?
- 5.) What foods are eaten at a traditional dinner?
- 6.) Are there specific foods prepared for festivals, religious holidays or special occasions?
- 7.) What foods are traditionally eaten for snacks?
- 8.) Are there health issues prevalent based on or related to the diet?

The anticipated outcome is as follows:

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- 1.) To determine the staple food of the regional diet by evaluating the overall diet.
- 2.) To determine if there are rituals, traditions or religious connotations in connection with the food eaten at celebrations or ceremonies.
- 3.) To determine if there are restrictions or taboos associated with the Belizean diet.
- 4.) To determine any health issues or conditions that could be related to the traditional Belizean diet compared to a more modern diet associated with the United States.

Results

Unequivocally speaking, the staple food of the Belizean diet is red beans and rice. This is served at every meal with the exception of breakfast, however in some areas, may be included in breakfast tortillas. However, the Belizean red beans and rice is somewhat unique from neighboring Latin countries and the United States due to the fact that they use red beans, black pepper and grated coconut instead of black beans and cilantro (Moon p. 305). This staple food in combination with stew beef including potatoes, fresh carrots and other vegetables such as cabbage is found to be the most common meal and was served in different formations many times throughout the week. The other predominate meat was chicken, mostly boiled but fixed with a variety of local spices. Fresh fruits are served with every meal due to their abundance and geographical location. This combination makes many of the meals high in starch which could possibly relate to health problems if the body does not metabolize them properly. Digestive problems may occur especially with the consumption of uncooked starches. Although starches are the most important carbohydrate in the human diet, it can lead to development of obesity and other digestive problems.

Each meal consisted of pineapple, papaya, watermelon, banana or cantaloupe in a variety of combinations. Contrast the lunch or dinner meals in the United States, few areas grow the

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variety of fresh fruits needed to maintain a healthy diet, such as the fiber received from pineapple and banana or the digestive properties of papaya. Much of the U.S. diet consists of canned, frozen or processed fruits and vegetables. Those that are fresh have been chemically treated for preservation while shipping to most inland regions.

During my research on site by interviewing Ching and Edgar, our Mestizo guides and by interviewing Anna Marie, the chef at Sabun educational center, I determined that soup is also a very common food consumed on weekly if not daily basis. The main meal or heavy meal according to those interviewed is at lunch time with a lighter fare served in the evening. Interestingly, this is also in accordance with AMA guidelines in The United States; however I did not find this to be the case during meals at Sabun, similar to many practices in the U.S.

Soup ingredients may vary by culture as well as some traditional dishes, but like the gumbo of people in Belize, the dishes are shared by all. Some specialty dishes may include Tamales made with corn meal and wrapped in banana leaves is derived from Mayan and Guatemalan cultures. Chicken soup is also a specialty made with chicken, carrots, rice and cabbage. Seri is made with coconut milk, vegetables and local seasonings and is always eaten on Garangu day and other special occasions according to Anna Marie who is Creole. Conch soup with white rice is a seafood soup from the Conch shell mussel and is more commonly found along the coast due to transportation difficulties to keep food fresh.

In Belmopan, the specialty found was cow's foot soup which is a mixture of what would be considered vegetable soup in the U.S. with the substitution of a portion of the cow's foot and cartilage instead of the meaty beef. This as well is a popular Belizean dish with Guatemalan roots. Hudut is yet another soup common to Garangu and is traditionally eaten on Garifuna

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Independence day that consists of a fish and plankton based soup according to Kiera, a worker at the educational center who is mixed Creole and Garangu.

Seasonings added to dishes are fresh coconut, coconut milk, ginger root, all spice and complete seasoning, black pepper and salt.

Breakfast was found to be the least different from the U.S. diet. It consists of cooked eggs, sausage or bacon and sometimes a potato with fresh fruit and juice. There is a difference in the starch which is called Fry Jacks or Johnny cakes. This would be similar in nature to pancakes and perhaps baguettes in the American diet. The egg and meat can be combined on a flat tortilla with beans or salsa added. Tortillas were also commonly used in conjunction with hard boiled eggs and raw vegetables and cheeses to provide a lunch snack while out on expeditions.

A local specialty or delicacy that was served in Belize and not known to be served in the United States was called Gibnut or Paca, which is a rodent. Ceviche, a mixture of uncooked and marinated seafood is also found along coastal areas.

There were no taboos or religious connotations placed on food traditionally eaten in Belize. Although, there is the belief among many natives that certain soups and drinks restore health. Some soups, although always eaten on ceremonial days are still consumed throughout the year, so there are no restrictions on food or dietary habits.

According to those interviewed, a common health problem that is growingly plaguing the Belizean people is diabetes and digestive problems. This is also found to be a common problem in the United States as people become more obese due to lack of exercise and poor dietary habits. According to recent studies, diabetes is ranked among the ten leading causes of mortality in Belize. However, the leading cause of morbidity, based on the number of hospitalizations, were

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respiratory diseases and secondly intestinal disease and cardiovascular diseases accounted for 30% of all reported deaths during a 1997-2000 study.

Conclusion

The Belizean diet and American diet are very similar in the consumption of meats, vegetables and starches. However, the Belizean diet contains more fresh fruits and fresh foods than found in much of the processed foods found in the U.S. diet. Although, there are some similar health issues that can be related to diet such as diabetes and intestinal disease as well as some cardiovascular diseases, the conclusion drawn from this study is the lack of mortality and morbidity due to cancers. Can a conclusion be derived from this that the cancers that plague the U.S. population be linked to the consumption of so many processed foods? Do Belizeans have an edge on this because so much of their food consumed is fresh? I feel that my hypothesis is supported by the medical facts published about Belize and the fact that cancer does not rank in the top three categories for disease. I think more research could be done on the specifics of processed foods versus fresh foods. If I were to return to continue research, I think it would be wise to take a wider sampling of the population from a broader geographic area of the country.

The Belizean diet has many similarities to the modern diet of the United States. However, there are ethnic overtones due to the influences of the Spanish, Mayan and African cultures. The major difference I observed was between fresh foods of Belize and processed foods of the United States. Belizeans have a less rate of cancer and other diseases that are common in America with a few similar diseases noted such as diabetes, intestinal and cardiovascular disease.

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