

Eating 'real' food isn't just for foodies

by Sabine Eiche

Richmond News, September 4, 2015, p.25

A term we're hearing more and more is foodie, referring to someone who's particularly interested in real food. Call yourself a foodie, and you're also liable to be branded as trendy, not to mention elitist, because food that's genuine and of good quality is not cheap nowadays.

But up until some decades ago, nobody would have dreamt of giving you an epithet like foodie if you ate genuine food, because it was common practice to cook from scratch. And the taint of elitism certainly didn't apply. For instance, in Germany in the 1950s, even if your income was low, you ate real food – especially potatoes, onions, turnips and cabbage, or whatever happened to be abundant. Meat was too expensive for daily consumption – eggs and fish (then known as the poor man's meat) provided protein.

The renewed focus on real food – growing, cooking, eating it – is largely in reaction to processed and fast foods and the direction in which food production has been heading for the last decades. And it's not limited to North America – remember that the Slow Food movement began in Italy, ignited by the news in 1986 that a McDonald's was to open at the Spanish Steps in Rome.

However, even if foodie is a new term (joining other "cute" labels such as techie, groupie, selfie), the idea of having specific words to describe someone interested in food is hardly new. As early as 1586, a person concerned with refined eating and drinking was called an epicure. The term derives from the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus, who taught that man's natural aim was pleasure leading to a mind free of anxiety and a

body free of pain. According to Epicurus, pleasure was attained by living (and eating) simply. His views on eating and drinking were soon distorted as advocating luxurious dining, and that corruption has endured.

Another ancient Greek, the grammarian Athenæus, gave us the word *deipnosophist* (documented 1656), signifying a master of the art of dining. It's based on his miscellany of writings entitled "*Deipnosophistae*," much of which deals with gastronomy.

French is the source for two more words to describe a person focused on food and eating – *gourmet* and *gourmand*. *Gourmet*, documented from 1820, signifies a connoisseur of food and wine and has as its source the Old French "*groume*," meaning wine-taster. The Middle French "*gourmant*," meaning glutton, gave us the term *gourmand*. In use by 1491, *gourmand* refers to someone fond of eating (the verb *gormandize* means to eat like a glutton). Thus, although often used synonymously, they're in fact very different – a *gourmet* is concerned with quality, a *gourmand* with quantity.

In June 2014, the New York Times food columnist Mark Bittman published a piece, "Rethinking the word 'foodie'." It hit a nerve with his readers, provoking over 260 comments, some very witty (one reader styled himself a "gastronaut"), about the implications of the term *foodie*.

So what, exactly, is a *foodie*? It's still open to discussion, but here's my favourite comment to Bittman's story – "A *foodie* is a *groupie* who takes a selfie while dining out."