

# **Food Super Sizing: Understanding Its Expectation and Demonstration of Respect in Indigenous Polynesia**

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Inherent in the Polynesian food culture is “super-size” servings of food offered as a display of love, gratitude, and joy. To a large extent, Polynesians in the United States and other developed countries remain true to this cultural norm of respect, hospitality, thanksgiving, and gratitude by greeting and serving large or whole portions of food to family guests, visitors and elders, or adults in the family. Food plays a significant role in Polynesian cultural events, from village chief council meetings to weddings, funerals, birthdays, to family and church group gatherings and celebrations.

While some ancient ways of life and culture have disappeared since the arrival of European and American influence in Polynesia during the nineteenth century, traditional foods cooked on hot stones in a ground pit or oven are still popular today. However, due to the heavy labor involved in cooking traditional foods, daily meals of traditional food may be limited to being served once a week or less.

The traditional meals would include complex carbohydrates such as taro, breadfruit, green banana, sweet potato and yams; protein sources would include fish and/or other seafood choices including lobster, crab, and seaweed; greens would include okra and sweet potato, hibiscus manihot leaves, and taro leaves garnished with coconut milk. Spring water, homemade hot cocoa, or hot tea made from lemon or other herbal leaves accompany all meals. Western foods, which are primarily refined and high in sugar and fat, are easier to prepare and cook on stoves, and unfortunately, they also are served in large portions in the same cultural perception and spirit of hospitality and respect for family guests and elders.

It is not uncommon to find whole cooked chickens, fish, pig, taro, yam, and large cuts of lamb flaps, beef, or other fattening meats such as corned beef on the family dining table or on individual place mats. This manner of service is a demonstration of cultural pride, respect, kindness, hospitality, appreciation for company, and a form of welcome for new or ongoing familial courtship and friendship. Guests or visitors, especially, are expected to return respect with respect by consuming a good-size meal in addition to accepting a “care package” of food to take home, particularly for guests who are not spending the night. The same hospitable treatment is extended to guests lodging at a hotel to ensure they never go hungry. An understanding of this important cultural value in “super” sizing food portions is very important for nutrition and health professionals to consider in their clinical or outreach educational programs. The population of Polynesian minorities in the United States and other Western societies is increasing. Without consideration of this cultural imperative, attempts to counter escalating rates of obesity among Polynesian minorities will be ineffective

programming and poor investment.

### **Polynesian History**

Polynesia lies within a roughly triangular area between Hawaii to the north, Fiji to the west, New Zealand to the southwest, and Easter Island to the southeast. Sharing a common ancestry, the Polynesians migrated from Southeast Asia around 2000–5000 B.C. They are believed to have migrated from southeastern China eastward to New Guinea, the Philippines, Indonesia, Indochina and the Malay Peninsula, and ultimately into the Pacific islands or Polynesia.

To the amazement of European explorers, the Polynesians depended on their traditional skill and knowledge of the ocean, wind, and stars for voyaging and navigation to new fishing grounds, which also led to the discovery of new islands that became home. European explorers found that the islanders looked alike, spoke alike, and had similar cultural practices. Their tools of stone, bone, and coral used to build their canoes and fishing tools were very similar. Their stocks of domesticated plants (such as taro, yam, breadfruit and other plants) and animals (such as pigs and chickens) belonged to similar species.

The Polynesian languages that are spoken readily and fluently in almost all the Pacific islands have many common words with common reference and application. Polynesian entertainment, including performances of dance and music in the different island tongues, is well known and popular throughout the world.

### **Population**

According to the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau Report, the population of Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders (including Guam and Micronesian) in the United States was 874,414 or 0.3% of the total U.S. population. In the 2002 U.S. Census, 12.5 million or 4.4% of the total population was Asian and Pacific Islanders (about 7%). At least 50% of the Asian/Pacific Islander population live in the West, 19% live in the South, 12% live in the Midwest, and 19% live in the Northeast. Overall, the Asian/Pacific Islander population is young: 26% are under 18 and only 7% are 65 and older. About 95% of Asian/Pacific Islanders live in metropolitan areas. There is a growing awareness among Polynesians that there are now more of them migrating to and living in the United States (including Hawaii) and other developed non-U.S. countries than back in the islands.

### **Polynesian Body Frame**

Professional football players and servicemen of Polynesian descent are known for being big, tall, and heavy weight. Most Polynesian women, compared to their age-adjusted peers in other countries, also have large frames, are tall and heavy weight. An ongoing research project examining the large build of Polynesians, particularly Samoans, by exploring and comparing traditional to modern diets, eating habits, daily physical activity, and overall lifestyle changes. The study also looks at other attributes to the obesity that is rampant among Samoans in Samoa, American Samoa, Hawaii, and west coast United States. Obesity also is observed in the diverse population of Polynesians in New Zealand, including the native New Zealanders or Maori, and among Polynesians living in Australia.

## **Health Status**

Similar to the health status of inhabitants of other developed countries and continents, the overall health of Polynesians has changed drastically with modernization, change, and the introduction of imported and fast foods. For instance, recent research suggests that Samoans in American Samoa are among the most obese in the world. Further, Samoans in Hawaii and west coast United States primarily are overweight and obese. Generally, all of the Polynesian islands—including Hawaii, Tonga, Tahiti, Fiji, non-U.S. Samoa, American Samoa, and New Zealand—have growing obesity problems and other related non-communicable diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, diabetes, renal disease and gout. Obesity is further accelerated enhanced by the change in lifestyle from intensive physical labor to minimal physical activity and sedentary desk jobs.

The overall diet in the Pacific islands has gone from wholesome to refined: daily complex carbohydrates to simple and refined carbohydrates of unenriched bread and rice; fish to daily fatty meats such as lamp flaps, pig's feet, pork, turkey tails, beef and corned beef. Sweet carbonated beverages are readily available and preferred over spring water.

## **Polynesian Food Culture To Date**

Island hospitality remains important and is assured by offering lots of food for self service. Unfortunately, the popular food choices rarely, if ever, include vegetables or greens and fruits.

On my visits to Polynesian households in the United States, Hawaii, New Zealand and Tonga, I consistently observed super sizing of island and non-island foods. The islanders are not hesitant to serve large portions of Western food in place of island food to guests and visitors. Whether a Polynesian lives in Seattle, Washington, Dallas, or New York City, “fast food” would take the place of wholesome island food in large servings to demonstrate gratitude and respect.

## **Recommended Nutrition and Health Education Approach**

Polynesians, referred to in the census as Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, or mingled with Asians in the Asian and Pacific Islander data, are increasingly aware that unhealthy choices of food contribute to obesity and other related non-communicable diseases such as chronic diseases of the heart, liver, blood, and bone. They also are aware that food over-consumption and physical inactivity are unhealthy. However, awareness is only the beginning of the road map to meaningful change.

The purpose of this paper is to bring to the attention of nutrition and health professionals working with Polynesians or Pacific Islanders some understanding of the Polynesians' deeply embedded cultural value in offering super size food servings.

To a large extent, health/nutrition professionals who demonstrate a respect, knowledge and consciousness of things Polynesian—including recognizing island food culture and traditional foods—prior to trying to establish an educator-learner relationship are welcomed with open arms. A suggested model is recognizing, reminding, and perpetuating the consumption of wholesome food choices of fruits, vegetables, fish and lean meats, and drinking lots of water. These were the traditional foods of their ancestors who had no known record of obesity and chronic heart diseases. Studies and reports verify that the diet of Polynesians in the islands and abroad today is very low in both fruits and vegetables.

Realistically, cost and availability may be serious hindrances to accessing traditional fruits such as mango, papaya, passion fruit, young coconut, and guava; vegetables that are deep green such as taro, hibiscus manihot, and sweet potato leaves; as well as pumpkin and breadfruit. However, once empowerment and trust are in place in the educator-learner relationship, the island fruits and vegetables—which are abundant all-year round in the islands—could be successfully substituted for local fruits and vegetables of similar taste, color, nutritional value, in their recommended serving sizes for different ages.

Cooking techniques have changed as well. Compared to cooking today in lots of frying oil, soy sauce, monosodium glutamate and salt, meat traditionally was grilled on hot stones (ridding it of most of the fat) and seawater was used in place of salt for flavoring. Food was wrapped in mango, banana, breadfruit and taro leaves, which added natural flavor and nutrition. Papaya leaves were used to tenderize octopus before cooking. With the exception of salt, these practices are ongoing for special occasions in the islands, but not in the United States.

To further encourage participation in health and nutrition education lessons, it is important to understand that Polynesians prefer to learn in small groups of neighbors, family members, and friends. Church groups are popular and have been successful sites for learning and applying new knowledge in other studies. Polynesian family is hardly nuclear—neighbors, related or unrelated, are embraced by Polynesians like family and would enjoy learning together with them.

The concept of recipe cooking is not new to Polynesians living abroad. However, lesson presentation without hands-on learning is unlikely to transfer to home cooking. Further, handouts and other printed materials including recipes may not be successful teaching tools. There is a preference for hands-on learning with its connection to their ancestral upbringing in a very oral culture. Despite relocating to Western culture, parents continue to perpetuate their oral traditions through story telling, dance, music, and display of island crafts. High regard for elders and adults in the home is central, and the best of what is available is theirs. Given these ongoing cultural practices away from their island home, offering respect for respect is imperative and undoubtedly will lead to success in health and nutrition engagements upon entering Polynesian households.

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