Sweet Choco Pie

In the middle of my sophomore year in college, I received an email from the South Korean Army saying that I needed to start my military service in May of the following year. Before I was stationed, I had to go through an eight-week long basic training camp that tested the physical, mental, and emotional elements of service. I was able to endure all of the training, but I never got used to having the same kind of meal three times a day for the whole duration of the boot camp. The typical meal contained rice, Kimchi (fermented vegetables), soup, and variety of side dishes (meats and vegetables). After just a few days, I yearned for something different. I was craving all kinds of food, ranging from crunchy chips to anything sweet that could possibly awake my taste buds. During week four of the training camp, after a gruesome field exercise of marching for eight hours, my squad members and I came back to the base camp with surprise gifts from our non-commissioned officers. Next to our sleeping mats were a can of soda and a Choco Pie. Akin to the American Moon Pie, a Choco Pie is a dessert consisting of two small round layers of vanilla cake with marshmallow fillings covered with chocolate. I will never forget the elated faces of my squad members as we devoured the pies with tears of joy. My memory of Choco Pie reveals the importance of the role of food in creating community within constraints, integrating national identity, and defining authenticity.
Making food choices in basic training camp is a clear example of how agency and structure work together to shape human behavior. Agency is defined as people making choices and shaping the world they live in. Structure is defined as enduring social patterns that shape human behavior (Lecture, 3.31.16). In terms of agency and structure, I had no ability to make food choices when I was in basic training camp. Food was provided by the training center and I had to either consume the food or give it to someone else. The recruits in boot camp were forced to eat the same three meals and only had the option to either consume the food or donate it to a fellow comrade. Under the constraints of the army, the act of making choices was limited and the overall structure eventually shaped the behaviors of the recruits. The non-commissioned officers were privileged to use their agency to shape the overall structure because they were able to provide other choices to the recruits. As a result, the Choco Pie was a trigger that created a sense of community within these constraints.

Commensality was achieved when my squad members and I took that first bite of Choco Pie. It was truly a magical moment of sharing the same kind of food, eating together as a team, and sharing the same emotions of joy. Commensality is defined as sharing food and eating together. Warren Belasco, the author of *Food: The Key Concepts* further describes commensality when he writes, “sharing food has almost magical properties in its ability to turn self-seeking individuals into a collaborative group” (Belasco, Lecture, 4.5.16). Through commensality, individuals from different backgrounds are able to have companionship. The act of eating Choco Pie created a strong bond between the recruits and the non-commissioned officers, and produced a source of empathy among the recruits. The soft and sweet Choco Pie was comfort food
that gave an emotional boost to all the recruits after a tough field training day. My squad members and I were able to empathize and understand one another because all of us were craving something sweet that could possibly energize our exhausted bodies. Moreover, commensality facilitates egalitarianism by breaking the wall between insiders and outsiders. For example, in Lin T. Humphrey’s article “Soup Night”, he states, “the act of eating together is both powerful and symbolic. Eating a common food, in this case soup, creates a communion of common values” (Humphrey, p. 66). The sharing of Choco Pie united each individual and created a sense of equality as we were eating the same food. For instance, an introverted squad member hardly talked to anyone in the squad. He was eventually treated as an outsider until the magical moment of commensality. Everyone shared the same emotions of happiness that led to the formation of companionship without anyone feeling excluded. The outsider transformed into an insider as we bonded through the act of eating together. The Choco Pie not only creates community, but also brings out the national pride in many South Koreans.

Choco Pie is considered a South Korean national snack that strengthens the national identity in South Koreans. Choco Pie was first released to the consumers of South Korea in 1974. Ever since its release, it has been named the national snack for its deliciousness and affordable price. The popularity of Choco Pie also spread throughout the world. The availability of the product increased and Choco Pie became available in most Korean supermarkets around the world. Even though Choco Pies are mass-produced in industrial corporations, I still believe Choco Pies are authentic since I am able to connect to the product personally because of my time in boot camp. However, some people may argue that mass-produced goods cannot be authentic. For
example, Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann, the authors of *Foodies Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape* argue that, “authentic food is distinguished as ‘quality’ artful food, and distant from industrial foods’ faceless, mass-produced lineage, obvious commercial motivations, and unfortunate dearth of authenticity” (Johnston, Baumann, 2010, p. 85). Johnston and Baumann criticize mass-produced goods because of their poor quality and their missing link between the consumers and specific creators. In my opinion, Choco Pies have a strong link because there is national pride behind the food. The national identity associated with Choco Pie makes the snack authentic to South Koreans. As children in South Korea grow up, they develop personal connections to Choco Pie that cannot be just explained by the “quality” of the food. Authenticity can be described by the national identity connected to Choco Pie and how the food encourages South Koreans to reminisce about their favorite childhood snack.

The way Choco Pie creates companionship within the limitations of the army shows the significance of commensality in our society. Unlike in training camp, the freedom to choose what we eat on a daily basis is a powerful advantage in our modern society. There may be some constraints that influence the availability of a specific food, but instead we should appreciate the foods that are available and the various choices we can make in our social structure. Furthermore, Authentic food is not always defined as “quality” food. Choco Pies, which are mass-produced, can be authentic because of their rich history, ties to national identity, and the personal connections they create.

There is a cliché saying, “you are what you eat.” By eating and appreciating Choco Pie as a national snack, I can say that I am a proud South Korean. However, the act of eating Choco Pie does not mean that everyone eating Choco Pie will all be
sharing emotions of joy. Some people may not enjoy the snack itself and for others it may trigger other emotions. When I take a bite of Choco Pie, I am taken back to the blissful moments in basic training camp. However, I also reminisce about the hardships and the struggles I had to go through as a recruit. The food memory of Choco Pie helps me revisit my past emotions, but it cannot reveal what I am feeling in the present.