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# Eating healthy in the USA: Is it possible?

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## **Presentation**

This project is the study of American nutrition from the point of view of someone that has lived a whole year in the United States and had to stand all kinds of comments from acquaintances about stereotypes they have about this country. There was not a single person I talked to before I left that didn't mention any stereotypical food from what would be my host country. Conversations starting with «So, you are only going to eat burgers and fries there, right?» or «Watch out because you are going to gain a lot of weight while you are abroad» were some of the most common opinions I always heard before that time. I truly want to get rid of the most harmful stereotypes that we still believe up to this day, starting with my own ones. So, do they really eat as bad as we think? My intentions and goals are to deny the myths that many people have over this culture and the food in the USA and to show the most common stereotypes people have. Also, to find out how the food industry works and how we could eat healthier.

## **Methodology**

For this project I decided to base the research on mostly websites and also a book, which was the one that introduced me to the topic entitled *Fast Food Nation: the*

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*Dark side of the All-American Meal* , by Eric Schlosser. Many of the websites I used are trustful sources and verified by many associations. Most of the information for the *What does it mean to «Eat Healthy»?* section comes from the website of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), and the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The Dietary Guidelines for Americans are resources that are published every 5 years since 1980 and help many Americans choose healthy eating patterns. For this project, I used the current one, 2015-2020, and the last edition, 2010-2015. Other websites such as the Harvard's School of Public Health or nutrition-related articles have also been used in the research. I decided to separate the project in two parts: the theoretical and the practical. In the theoretical part, I explained all the topics I was interested in about the food from the most scientific part to the marketing vision of it. I also explained nutritional aspects of food, the origins of the cuisine in the United States until the present day and the history of Fast Food. Economics and Marketing in the Food industry was a topic that had a lot to say in this project. In the practical part, I tried to relate in some way all the sections presented in the theoretical part to something that I could use to prove if my hypothesis was right or wrong. For that, I used surveys and a study based on shopping tickets I collected from my host family.

## **Body**

Many people claim to be eating healthy. What many don't know is that sometimes we don't get the right information about nutrition and we end up believing in myths or popular ideas that may not be true. Eating healthy is balancing the variety of food you eat to keep your body strong, with energy and all different types of nutrients. Out of that definition no one has the exact recipe to a healthy nutrition. I found sources, like food diagrams such as the Food Guide Pyramid or the Healthy Eating Pyramid, that can help make nutrition easier from the point of view of eating from home. Next, I decided to talk about the United States in special, starting with the origins of their particular cuisine, what the processed food they consume is (although it's all over the world), and the stereotypes that people have over them. Restaurants such as McDonald's shaped the American culture from its beginning as a powerful country. This part was meant to put in context the situation of why the people of the United States eat like they do and what brought them to this point in the present. Continuing with the research, *Economics in the food industry* was a field that had to be introduced. In there, ideas such as the big brands or business that control the market, the basic concepts on organic production and the sugar industry are all explained in detail. I believed that people shopped differently depending on the prices that some products have. Following with the last section of the theoretical part, we get to the marketing in the food industry. The idea of «why

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we shop the way we shop» continued crossing my mind. This concept became how marketing affects us, both in the grocery stores and in the fast food.

The practical part mentioned before consisted, first, of two surveys I created to get to know the stereotypes that both cultures have about each other, American and Spanish, and to prove the point that there are stereotypes in both countries. Both surveys had the same kind of questions and participants around the same age, from 13 to 18. The first survey was intended to be responded by the Spanish population, in which I asked questions like what the most common food in the United States is, what do people think the rate of obesity in the country is and if they know any of these American Fast Food companies. The results in this survey were not surprising. Most of the people who participated in the survey knew about all American restaurants or had heard about them. Also, about the subject of obesity, about one third of all Spanish people that completed the survey believed that 70% of the US population is obese. The real facts are that only 30% of the population is. Another surprising fact was that 90% of all survey takers think food from the United States is unhealthy. The second survey was thought for American people to answer it. In this one, the results were pretty similar in some cases and incredibly different in others. Most of the survey participants had never heard of any Spanish Fast Food restaurant, such as Telepizza, Pans & Company or Rodilla. On the other hand, the dishes that most people chose were the touristic ones like *paella*, *tapas* or *tortilla de patatas*. In relation to the obesity concern, many Americans selected the lowest percents on the scale, about one third of all survey takers believed that 20% of Spanish population is obese. In relation to the real numbers, they were not as far as the respondents from the first survey. According to the World Health Organization, about 23% of Spanish people is obese. In both countries, people think that Spanish food is healthier than American. As I expected, the result of both surveys was really close to my initial hypothesis, making American people really obese in the eyes of others and having awful eating patterns.

The second practical part involves my stay in the US. I asked my host family to keep their shopping lists and receipts from grocery shopping for almost 3 months so I could analyse them later on. I finally ended up with 20 receipts. My goal for this study was to clarify that not all American families eat like we may think and to prove that it is possible to eat healthy in the United States. Getting into the analysis, I first highlighted each product bought from each ticket in a different color so I could identify it with their category (vegetables and fruits, protein, grain, fats and dairy). Once I had all tickets' information, I added up each category in a spreadsheet so that I could see how much money they spent over the 3 months. I created a circular graphic so it was easier to compare it to Harvard's Healthy Eating Plate. The total amount of money spent on food from April 28th until July 10th was \$1.300. The

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amount of vegetables and fruit did not reach the recommended percent, and the protein one exceeded it. The expense in grains was inferior to the recommended amount and dairy, in this case, was not analyzed properly due to the lack of information in the Food diagram. In the Healthy Eating Plate, by Harvard University, dairy is only mentioned once and says that it should be limited to one or two servings a day. On the other hand, 20% of the total money was spent on fats or sweets, being most of them cookies, snacks, sauces and sugary drinks. From the definition, most of them are high in trans fats and industrially processed and produced. It's only recommended to use healthy oils, such as olive and sunflower oil, and to avoid trans fats, like the ones they bought. This family did not accomplish the recommended amount of food from each category, according to the Harvard Healthy Eating Plate. But we can't ignore that 3 months is not enough to make a proper investigation over the cuisine of a whole country. Also, the fact that I didn't analyse a diet instead only what they shopped makes the study open to many other possibilities to the food they already had at home.

### **Conclusion**

This project helped me realize that many of the stereotypes we all hear everyday are a common thought. Many are obtained because of the lack of awareness, travelling and interest over the culture or group of people. For that reason, only those who get to call the United States, or any other country, their home know and understand better their culinary history. I discovered that it is impossible to give a whole country one stereotypes only because one small group of people live that way. About the tracking of the shopping of the American family, even though they didn't accomplish the recommendations set by Harvard's School of Public Health, their meals are not so different and definitely not only fast food. They probably eat better than many families here in Spain. And at the same time, they are not the best, but everybody still has time for some improvement in their diet. That's when we can decide to visit a nutritionist or an expert, or simply follow many of the tips and food diagrams that, if appreciated, can benefit our health in many ways. The hypothetical question asked at the beginning of the research project can be answered really simply. «Do they eat as bad as we think?» No, they don't. The problem behind is the enormous amount of comments and ideas we have about the United States, that make us think most of them are eating every single day junk food and they are obese, as I commented on the analysis of the survey, where some people declared the percentage of obesity to be much higher than what it is indeed. The reality is that it is true that not everybody eats healthy, but as I said before you can't generalize and say that 325,7 million people eat the same way. You can't get a generalized conclusion, but my own experience shows how different families buy from the

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grocery store, they cook, and they don't go out as much. After this time, I've learned that not two people are the same, nor countries, nor families. Not everybody in Spain thinks the same, and for sure not everybody has the same type of food at home. So, the same thing happens elsewhere.

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