



TRANSFORMING THE AMERICAN TABLE 1950–2000

Abstract

The Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) conducted a study of the exhibition, *FOOD: Transforming the American Table 1950-2000*, at the National Museum of American History (NMAH) during June and July 2013. The results reported here are based on the analysis of surveys completed by visitors leaving the exhibition. From a sample of 746 intercepted visitors, 475 completed surveys were collected (64% response rate).

Exiting visitors were asked to rate their overall experience in the exhibition using a five-point scale that OP&A has applied across Smithsonian exhibitions: Poor, Fair, Good, Excellent, and Superior. A majority of visitors (54%) rated *FOOD* Excellent or Superior. (The ratings were: The ratings for *FOOD* were 0% Poor, 6% Fair, 40% Good, 46% Excellent, and 8% Superior.)

Visitor experience ratings of *FOOD: Transforming the American Table 1950-2000* were lower than those from previous NMAH exhibition surveys. Looking at the ratings, Superior, i.e., really exciting experiences were few, and Poor/Fair/Good, i.e., problems/complaints were high. The average rating, Excellent, which means getting the expected level of experience, was comparable to other exhibitions.

Many visitors (71%) learned something they did not know before visiting this exhibition. Seven out of every ten (73%) saw something they once had or remembered, while nearly two thirds (64%) recalled a personal or family memory; 59% took photos. More than half of those visitors born after 1995 (53%) interacted with the food wheels on the communal table.

The reasons for the higher number of Fair and Good ratings and the lower number of Superior ratings are not entirely clear. An initial comparison of visitors' ratings to the types of experiences they tend to prefer suggests that the study sample included a relatively high percentage of people with a preference for physical experiences (movement, sound, touch, tastes, and smells) and that they found little to engage them. The OP&A study team recommends that NMAH study the exhibition in greater detail.