

Diet: Hot Climate, Hot Food.

Have you ever wondered why the hotter a country's climate, the hotter the food is that is eaten there? Professor Paul Sherman (professor of neurobiology and behaviour at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York) led a team of researchers who looked specifically at this question and found that there was a perfectly reasonable explanation as to why people who live in hotter climates tend to eat spicy food – the spicy seasonings help to keep people healthy. Spices are natural antimicrobials which can kill or inhibit the growth of food-borne pathogens and parasites which are more prolific in warmer climates.

Professor Sherman, who takes a Darwinian approach to medicine, reasons that people in hot countries learnt over time that spicy foods were less likely to make them feel ill and as they felt better eating the spicier foods, so they developed a preference for them.

In order to test out the theory of a climate-dependent evolution of spicy foods, the research team compared recipes for over 4000 meat dishes and over 1000 vegetable dishes from 36 different countries. They found

that the warmest countries had the spiciest foods, with meat dishes in particular being heavily spiced. This is because, unlike plants where antimicrobials originate, meat lacks the necessary defences against pathogens and parasites. By contrast, food in cooler climates tends to be much blander – for example if a piece of meat was left outside overnight in a very cold country, it would probably freeze which in turn would slow germ growth in the meat, rendering the use of spices unnecessary.

Professor Sherman is now studying whether certain spices fight pathogens and parasites on certain foods better than other spices, which in turn has resulted in certain spices always being eaten with particular foods.

Reference:-

Roach J “Why Some Like It Hot: Spices Are Nature's Med's, Scientist Says” National Geographic News November 11th 2005