Tet, the Vietnamese New Year festival, is the most revered celebration of Vietnamese culture. The festival is celebrated between harvests as a celebration of thanks for last season’s crops and prayer for successful harvests in the upcoming season. The festival’s celebration is focused on food and characterized by overeating; the focal dish is the traditional banh Tet, rice cake. The Vietnamese explain the history of the rice cake with a story about the sixth Hung King and his twenty sons (Avieli 2005: 173). The King could not decide which son to make his heir, but in a dream a genie told him to choose the son that brought him the most delicious food to be his successor. The following day he asked his twenty sons to bring him the most delicious food they could find. The sixteenth son dreamt of a deity that told him rice is a staple food and this would please his father, the deity then told him how to make a rice cake. The son served it to his father and won him over, succeeding in proving that the simple rice cake was superior to the exotic foods his brothers had offered the King. This story exemplifies the Vietnamese peoples’ value in pragmatics and practicality (Avieli 2005:181). They prefer practical foods such as rice, over luxurious foods from foreign lands; it shows they are not pompous people but pride themselves on humbleness and simplicity. It also represents the Vietnamese’s patriotism, in that they are proud of their traditions (Avieli 2005: 177).

The rice cake is symbolic in other ways, for example its shape. The rice cakes are traditionally either square or round, representing earth and heaven. The act of creating these cakes during the Tet symbolizes re-growth and renewal of both earth and heaven. The square cakes express a focus on earth, especially farming for the Vietnamese (Avieli 2005:174). This again reminds us of the Vietnamese humbleness and gratitude for what nature has provided them. The sticky texture of the glutinous rice is also symbolic of the solidarity among the Vietnamese people and culture (Avieli 2005:175). Rice cakes were useful in war, because they can be well preserved and therefore could be taken along during battle (Avieli 2005:180). The rice cakes are resilient like the Vietnamese themselves, they persevere in harsh conditions. They are also packaged in a way that allows only very thin slices to be cut, to eat as little rice cake as possible, while also keeping the remaining rice cake fresh inside the bamboo wrapper, this is helpful during wartime because the men need to ration themselves. As the Vietnamese eat the rice cakes, either during war, Tet, or an ordinary day, they are integrating into themselves everything it symbolizes. Thus this, food is a source of nationalism for the Vietnamese people (Avieli 2005:183).

This article allowed me to understand the importance of food beyond its nutritional value. It is interesting that the simple rice cake holds so much symbolism to its people. It has taught me to not take food for granted as much but perhaps think about the symbolism of foods in my culture as well.