What did people eat from the start of civilisation to around the year 1500?
How did they get their food?
What caused food shortages?

Throughout most of history, most people never got enough to eat, and many people starved to death. Food was much more expensive than it is today, and governments helped people out less than they do now. Even farmers often went hungry when city people took all their food for themselves as taxes or tithes, or if the weather was bad and storms or viruses ruined the crop. Children went hungry more than their parents, because if the parents starved the children would probably die soon anyway from neglect, where if the parents survived the famine they could always have more kids. When people could get food, the food people ate varied a good deal from time to time and from place to place.

There are some things all these times and places had in common, though.

First, one reason food was so expensive was that there was no refrigeration or freezers. It was very hard to keep food from going bad. One strategy most people used all over the world was to eat a lot of fish and shellfish like crabs, mussels, clams, and oysters. Those foods kept themselves fresh and alive, and you could just go fishing or gathering shellfish fresh for every meal.

People also worked hard to preserve foods that didn't keep. The most important method was drying food and storing it carefully: people stored wheat and barley and millet and rice and corn. They also dried fruit to make raisins, dried figs and dates, dried beans, dried corn, and dried apples. In Peru, people freeze-dried potatoes. People pickled eggs and vegetables, meat, and fish in brine (salty water) to make pickles and garum, a fermented fish sauce. They fermented grape juice and apple juice and barley to turn them into wine and cider and beer. They made milk into yogurt and cheese. They smoked meat from pigs to make ham and bacon, and they preserved meat in honey.

Second, because it was so hard to carry things from one place to another without canals or trains or trucks, most people could only eat local, seasonal food. If there was a shortage of food because of bad weather or crop diseases, or because soldiers had wrecked the crops in a war, people starved. People in different places ate very different foods, depending on what plants grew and what animals lived there.

In China, people ate soybeans, rice, tea, chickens, citrons, and peaches.

In India, it was sugar and bananas.

In Central Asia, where people raised cattle, they ate a lot of yogurt, cheese, and beef, but also apples and carrots.

In West Asia, it was barley bread, chickpeas, lentils, olive oil, and wine.

In Africa, people ate figs, yams, palm oil, beer, coffee beans, teff, and millet.

Further north in Europe, they drank beer too, but with salted ham and bacon, butter, oats and rye bread.
Across the Atlantic Ocean in South America, people enjoyed potatoes, corn, peanuts, tomatoes, peppers, and chocolate, while further north in what we now know as the US and Canada, people ate turkey, sweet potatoes, sunflower seeds, salmon, and wild rice.

But another important strategy people had was to bring new foods to their area from other places.

Central Asians brought pigs and cows and apples to West Asia around 7000 BC; dates first came from West Asia to Africa about 4000 BC.

Wheat first reached China from West Asia about 2500 BC; chickens first reached West Asia from India about 1000 BC.

Bananas reached Africa from India around 500 BC, and rice left India for West Asia and Europe a few hundred years later.

The strength of Central Asia and the rise of the Silk Road between 500 BC and 1500 AD encouraged a lot more trading of food all across Asia. More Central Asian cinnamon and pepper began to reach Europe and China. Bee-keeping traveled from West Asia to China, and peaches, lemons, and oranges returned in the other direction. Central Asian food scientists bred better carrots and sold them. Sugar spread from India all over Asia and even as far as Europe and North Africa; coffee and tea spread across Asia from Africa and China.

When Europeans began sailing across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas about 1500 AD, they brought sheep and pigs and chickens, wheat, beehives, sugar, and apples with them. A little later, it was tea and coffee. From the Americas to Europe, they sailed back with potatoes, tomatoes, corn on the cob (maize), turkey, chili peppers, squash, chocolate, and avocados. They brought American sweet potatoes to China, where poor people started to eat sweet potatoes as their main food.