

Eating in Class

Gastronomy, Taste, Nutrition,
and Teaching Food History

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In May to July 2010, food historians from across the world gathered virtually (as a Google group) to share experiences of teaching food history. The forum that follows is an edited version of our discussion.

The complete, unedited version of our conversation will remain available for public view at www.groups.google.ca/group/rhr-radical-foodways. We encourage *Radical History Review* readers, students and teachers alike, to continue these discussions online.

Food history classes have become increasingly commonplace in history curriculums, yet they are still rare enough that they illicit comments and occasional laughter and derision. While exciting, innovative, and likely to fill a lecture hall, food history classes, as comparatively recent and unexpected offerings, carry a greater burden of pedagogical proof. As our forum suggested, in a range of academic settings, food historians, unlike other scholars, must demonstrate the academic merit of their classes—long before they walk into the classroom door. Despite (or maybe because of) obvious student demand, we cannot depend on presuppositions of significance.

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In many ways, our forum participants recognized that, while we might face titters in the faculty lunchroom, our persistent need to justify our offerings as more than “gut” classes provides an extraordinary opportunity for self-reflection. While food historians can and do make claims that food, like other curricular subjects, matters in and of itself, they must also make connections to broader themes, including histories of empire, commodities, industrialization, and modernity. Many of our participants noted that long before they could teach a dedicated food class or seminar, food history was sometimes slipped in through the back door, often as part of larger introductory global history courses. While the vast scope of such courses can baffle the beginning university student, food history provides something intimate, tangible, and even familiar around which to structure larger narratives.

Food is familiar and, simultaneously, exotic. At the most basic level, every student has some experience with the basic subjects of food history classes, whether that is with immigrant foodways or fast food. Commodities discussed in class, such as coffee, chocolate, or tea, might even be in-class snacks. The obvious advantage—and challenge—for the food history teacher is to build knowledge upon the familiar. Students can be placed within commodity chains that stretch widely across time and space. But, does this create uncomfortable binaries between the knowable present (often defined by easy consumption) and the exotic other (defined often by the non-West and by production and labor)? How do we resist representations of students primarily as consumers of goods made by the faraway and luckless laborer? Equally, the food historian must grapple with existing knowledge. As the articles in this special issue aptly demonstrate, food is increasingly at the center of popular culture and popular politics. In the twelve or so weeks we have with students, how do we provide readings, lectures, and discussions that help students engage more forcefully with everything from food television to supermarket visits? At the same time, many of our students claim real ownership over the foods discussed and sometimes sampled in class. Food history in its global reach works effectively to draw in diverse students, including first-generation immigrants, partly because food is often a tangible manifestation of identity. We are, in effect, asking students to historicize themselves.

As our forum demonstrated, food history classes are emerging globally. Perhaps for this very reason, even when food history classes engage with the history of a particular nation or region, the context is frequently transnational and global. Food history classes at both the undergraduate and graduate levels are also often offered outside history departments, including in food and nutrition programs and cooking schools. Partly as a result, the multidisciplinary roots of food history, sometimes conceptualized as gastronomy, remain important. It is impossible to imagine a food history class outside its links, especially to human anthropology.

Our forum included Rachel Ankeny, Warren Belasco, Daniel Bender, Amy Bentley, Elias Mandala, Jeffrey Pilcher, and Peter Scholliers. We teach in a broad

geographic and scholarly range of institutions from traditional history departments to nutrition studies programs to gastronomy programs.

Entering the Food Classroom

Graduate programs that offer training in food history or gastronomy remain rare. Though a generation of self-described food historians is now emerging, few current practitioners can claim training as food historians. Our illustrative career trajectories demonstrated how our multifarious roots and differing relationships to the field shape our pedagogy.

Jeffrey Pilcher (JP): I'm basically a historian of Mexican food, although I have increasingly expanded my focus to food in world history.¹ My first experience teaching the history of food was in 1994, during my first job, a one-year visiting position at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. In addition to the Latin American surveys, the chair allowed me to teach a class on the history of food.

For the next ten years, I taught at the Citadel, the Military College of South Carolina. I didn't think the cadets were ready to sign up for a class called food history, so I sort of smuggled food into my classes through the core curriculum, first Western civilization, then world history. This was a great way of finding all the places where food has shaped history, from the earliest hunter gatherers to contemporary global commodity chains. Just before I left, I found a way of getting the cadets' attention, by teaching a class called "Drink in History," the only time I ever filled a class. When I moved to the University of Minnesota, I was ready to start teaching food history in a serious way. I continue to put food at the heart of my basic world history survey, but I also have a class explicitly called "Food in History," which I tend to teach differently depending on what I am working on at the moment. For example, the class focused on ethnic food and identity as I was working through questions of Mexican American food. Now, I am thinking more expansively about world history and methodologies, particularly in my graduate seminars.

Daniel Bender (DB): I am, at heart, a badly behaved labor historian who has strayed from original work on sweatshops to a more recent study of the cultural history of industrialization and empire in the United States.² Currently, I study animals (still alive) in a project on zoos and the notion of the exotic in American cultural history. This project is profoundly influenced by a few years now of studying and teaching food history.

At the University of Toronto, I proposed a course on food history. It was eagerly accepted in what is perhaps a sign of changing times. I have been offering a course on global food history at the undergrad level for five years now. Very happily, the university allows (insists upon) cooking and sampling. At the grad level, the University of Toronto mostly through happenstance has developed a specialization

in food history and now has a range of students working in the field at the MA and PhD level. I see myself as engaged with some of the key questions the field raises about global, imperial, and transnational histories. All this has led me to work on live animals—rather than those dressed for the table.

Rachel Ankeny (RA): I am the program manager of the gastronomy graduate program (which is housed in the School of History and Politics) at the University of Adelaide.³ My original PhD training was in history/philosophy of biomedical sciences and in bioethics, but I have a long-standing interest in food studies, particularly food history and philosophy. I taught History and Philosophy of Science and bioethics at University of Pittsburgh, Connecticut College, and University of Sydney, then decided to do a masters in gastronomy, which was the door into taking up my current position at the University of Adelaide. My research interests are rather wide ranging and include food ethics and Italian immigrant food habits, along with a variety of topics in history/philosophy of science.

My graduate teaching in food studies includes all of the core courses in our curriculum: a “Principles of Gastronomy” course (which examines the core issues in the field as well as the history of gastronomy itself), “Food and Drink in Contemporary Western Society” (which covers key issues in the twentieth to twenty-first centuries, including changing food habits in light of industrialization, modernization, and so on), and “Gastronomy and Communication” (which explores various means of communicating about food, including through literature, reviewing, art, etc.). I also have begun teaching an upper-level undergraduate course on “Food and Drink in World History.” A number of different types of students enrolled for this course in its first offering last year, including many nonmajors. I am interested particularly in a range of issues relating to this course, including how to teach such an expansive topic, how to adequately treat “drink” given the relative paucity of literature compared to the history of food, and also how to foster research skills in this area. I supervise a number of master’s dissertations as well as work with several PhD-level students within the general history program who are focused on food history topics.

Amy Bentley (AB): I call myself a cultural historian of food.⁴ My research and writing focus on food and the twentieth-century United States. Way back in the 1980s, when I was in graduate school in American civilization at the University of Pennsylvania, I became interested in the cultural and symbolic meanings of food while working on my dissertation on food rationing during World War II. I found the literature from folklore and anthropology incredibly compelling and sought to incorporate that type of analysis into my historical work. As I was finishing up my dissertation, I stumbled upon a notice for an early meeting of the Association for the Study of Food and Society, and, much to my delight, realized there were others interested in the same questions.

I've been a part of the Department of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health at NYU since 1996, when it launched its food studies program. While my current project is a history of baby food in the United States, my teaching expands well beyond that. I've taught a variety of courses over the years, but in the past year have taught "Food History," which takes a macro approach to food from foraging societies to more contemporary globalization; "Food and Culture," which employs sociology and anthropology to examine food and identity; and "Food Systems I: Agriculture," which focuses on the historical and contemporary production of food.

Warren Belasco (WB): Although I was socialized as a historian and still think like one (chronologically), since 1979, I've taught in a separate American Studies Department at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.⁵ So I guess I'm something of a lapsed historian.

My first publication about food was a short 1979 article about the history of Howard Johnson's—a by-product of my main work, which was on car travel. I remember fondly my dean's reaction to that article: "Howard Johnson's!! For God's sake!!" But deans come and go, like invasive pests, while we, the professorial peasantry, endure, quietly tending our potatoes. In my case the garden expanded slowly through the eighties, under the deanly radar so to speak. By the time I published *Appetite for Change* (1990), I was tenured and immune to administrative mayhem. I taught my first food course in 1985—a research seminar devoted to commodity chain analysis. My survey of the food system ("American Food") started up in 1990, and both courses have been part of the standard repertoire ever since. I can't say that I've made much impact on the institutional structure, however; when I retire, that may be the end of food studies at UMBC, as my colleagues still eye me with considerable amusement and suspicion, especially in the faculty dining room. I doubt they'll look for another "food person." Students love the subject, however, and that's all that matters.

Peter Scholliers (PS): I started working as a historian in the late 1970s, dealing with the "biggest debate in social and economic history ever," that is, the question of real wages during the industrial revolution in Europe around 1800.⁶ I dealt with prices, wages, purchasing power, index numbers, and lots of quantitative measurements. I wished, like many others, to demonstrate that the working classes suffered badly from the industrialization process and its consequences. I started teaching "food history" undercover. The course was (and still is) labeled "European Mentalities and Cultures in Historical and Comparative Perspective," and isn't meant for historians but for postgrads in political science. Students are coming in from all over the world (mainly Europe and Asia, though). Most of them love the course (at least, that's what they tell me). They have to read, summarize, and comment on papers; write an essay ("My food"); and look up Internet addresses (you may take a look

at the result of their efforts at www.vub.ac.be/SGES/foodlinks.html). Some of the courses are pretty chaotic (we eat and drink now and then). What's relevant to me is the fact that most students get some awareness about food (in terms of identity, supply, agrobusinesses, etc). I also teach food history to history students on the master's level, which started in September 2010 and which is part of close collaboration with the universities of Barcelona, Bologna, and Tours.

Elias Mandala (EM): I came to food studies as a social historian. My first book, *Work and Control in a Peasant Economy: A History of the Lower Tchiri Valley in Malawi, 1859–1960*, identified the region's food system as my next major research project.⁷ Started in the mid-1990s, the study dovetailed with what I now call the "crisis" literature, which sought to understand the origins of the food shortages that plagued the African continent between the 1970s and early 1990s. But, after listening to ordinary villagers, particularly women, the limitations of this narrow focus on moments of want became obvious. The ordinary has to be understood in its own right and not simply as the flipside of the extraordinary. Inspiration for this phase of the project came from Stephen J. Gould's *Time's Arrow and Time's Cycle*. I subsequently published *The End of Chidyerano: A History of Food and Everyday Life in Malawi, 1860–2004*, which utilizes villagers' accounts both as "information" and as rural philosophies and offers a history of food as well as a method of thinking about food and life in general. The different courses on food I have taught here the past fifteen years or so bear the mark of the development of my ideas from the 1990s to the present. For a taste of an African cuisine I normally take my students to one of the two Ethiopian restaurants in town.

The Entrée: The Classroom Context

Food matters—but it is also a familiar and interesting way for students to consider broader subjects. The tension between teaching food history for what it says about larger themes and for what it reveals about how and why we eat reflects developments in the field itself. Food history, while retaining its soft boundaries, is developing its own cohesion. The integrity of the field has curricular ramifications, as scholars must grapple in the classroom not only with teaching the field itself but also with maintaining dynamic and organic connections to larger themes, especially in global and transnational histories. Food historians must also consider the loose definition of food itself, as symbol, commodity, and object of taste. While we consider new methodologies, including the history, anthropology, and biology of taste, we also must consider the place of food—real and edible—in the classroom. Why do we eat in class? We must balance the shock value of academic tasting, that is, asking students to eat something strange, with the goal of introducing new academic vocabularies and engaging with new analytical methods.

DB: Do we teach food history because food itself distinctly matters? Or, is food history an entrée into broader or different questions, for example, about migration, empire, or industrialization? How do we insert recent insights about “taste” into a food history curriculum that is often about larger contexts?

JP: The first part of this question has been batted around by food studies scholars for a long time, both in pedagogical and theoretical form. My personal answer is that food distinctly matters because it touches on so many important questions and, because students are interested, it can help draw their attention to other questions. I think that taste can contribute to that pedagogical enterprise most directly when we bring food into the classroom. For example, I like to have students read an article by anthropologist Susan Terrio on grand cru chocolate.⁸ We discuss the ways that salespeople narrate social distinction through their consumption. Then, when students have denounced taste as an artificial bourgeois artifice, I pass around samples of a couple of different kinds of chocolate and without further discussion ask them to decide for themselves whether they actually do taste different.

WB: I’d say both reasons apply—the intrinsic value of food, and food as entry into other issues. Like most of us, I came into the field for the latter reason—in my case, to use food as a case study in the hegemonic process (applied to the mainstreaming of natural foods.) At that point (mid-eighties) there were not many professional historians doing food at all, so I enjoyed the relative lack of competition. Only after I completed my first food book—*Appetite for Change*—did I discover that there was indeed a field of “food studies.”⁹

Since then I’ve decided to stick around the food world. But I think most historians have treated it as a one-book thing and then have moved on to other worlds to conquer. I went native, so to speak, and am glad I did. Fortunately, just about any subject relates to food, so it’s a big universe. As a gatekeeper of sorts (ex-journal editor), I think there’s now a critical mass of scholars, including historians, for whom food is the first consideration—so much so that at *Food, Culture and Society* we often rejected the papers written by people who were just passing through, as they tended not to be grounded in the existing food scholarship.

AB: I agree with Warren that “food matters” in history for both reasons. It is an entrée (Dan probably wrote this with a straight face, but it’s hard to avoid food puns) into the larger questions and food is itself intrinsically interesting and important. Food for some students makes big, unwieldy, complicated topics, seemingly far from their experience (politics, international trade, and empire), feel more approachable and easier to grasp. They can make a connection, maybe because of the concrete, visceral nature of food, maybe because everyone eats food, ideally often.

While I've always loved examining the symbolic and cultural aspects of food—the intimacy of food that, I think, makes it approachable for students—lately I've been compelled by food's centrality to nearly all the big topics in the standard historical narrative. In my graduate food history seminar, we spend time understanding how food can be written front and center into each traditional period (ancient civilizations, middle ages, renaissance, early modern period, etc.). Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power*, for example, illustrates how the bodies of slaves producing sugar in the Americas are not only feeding the bodies of the proletariat working in the Satanic mills of England but also the meanings and uses of industrialized sugar work to shape the very notions of time and value in industrialized society.¹⁰ Sugar connects slavery and industrialization, empire and modernity, in such concrete visceral ways. In this class, we also spend time on the “great moments in food history”: paradigm shifts that qualitatively as well as quantitatively change the nature of food production and consumption. This includes the transformation from foraging to agricultural societies, the Columbian exchange, early modern colonialism/industrialization, and modern globalization. I also consistently use Jeffrey's and Warren's books in the course, two examples of terrific food history that do just what we've been discussing: link food to larger historical questions of power, politics, economics, and gender but are intrinsically interesting food topics themselves. They consider Mexican cuisine and national identity, the 1970s U.S. counter-culture movement, and intellectual discourse about food supply and population.

As for taste: this is a huge, really interesting topic that crosses so many disciplines. To understand taste historically we should borrow from other scholarly disciplines (anthropology, folklore, sociology) as well as take cues from culinary historians and others who have done painstaking, important work on recipes, ingredients, and techniques from the past.

RA: I would say that I primarily see food (and drink) as a lens into broader social, historical, and cultural issues. That is not to say that I don't think there are special issues raised by food history, but that I think it is important not to go too far overboard in our privileging of food and lose sight of these broader issues.

As several people have noted, many undergraduates in particular take our food history course (as well as one in anthropology) explicitly because it is a food course; they otherwise think that history is very dry or irrelevant to them. I take it as my task to show them otherwise, and in particular to “sneak in” instruction in historical research methods along the way under the guise of letting them look into tacos, crisps, or Cosmopolitans. This sort of approach is hardly unique to food history, but in some way we are advantaged over colleagues trying to teach other types of history (say, medieval or Civil War) because our students have much more direct experience with the topics under discussion. Or, I should say, they think they do!

One of the main points I bring out is that their food experiences are definitely not those of their grandparents or even their parents, let alone anyone living in a very different cultural context.

Which brings us around to taste: I think this is an extremely tricky topic. I have found that undergrads have very ill-formed vocabularies (as most people do) with regard to translating what they experience in taste into language. Are there ideas about where to start with these types of students, beyond, for example, exercises with shock value, such as having them taste something they would never have dreamed of trying such as chicken feet?

JP: As Rachel points out, our students often lack the vocabulary to talk about taste—and I sympathize. There are at least three meanings of the word, and each one raises some interesting questions for teaching.

First, there is an increasingly scientific language, much of it coming out of work on the physiology of taste. Should we be teaching students to think about the physical components of taste? How do we do so in the classroom? I would love to hear the experiences of people who have actually brought undergraduates into a modern tasting laboratory. At the same time, we need to remember that a lot of this scientific research is coming out of food industry efforts to shape our tastes and sell more products. But then again, *industry* is a broad term, and European attempts to develop a science of terroir may have very different implications than, say, the product development of breakfast cereal manufacturers.

Second, taste can refer to personal preferences, which may also extend to wider communities as well. I like to talk in class about historical changes in taste, Amy's paradigm shifts, such as the early modern European culinary revolution away from spices. We can also think about the ways that particular tastes, or flavor principles, may mark the boundaries between different societies and exclude outsiders. Those chicken feet that freak out some undergraduates are of course a dim sum favorite. So how can we use taste to explore cross-cultural difference?

Third, there is Pierre Bourdieu's sense of taste as a form of distinction within particular societies. At least in the United States, McDonald's has acquired a very downscale image. And yet, we might want to think about why it might actually symbolize social mobility for some. Moreover, as Warren has pointed out, in the early days, McDonald's worked very hard to exclude undesirable elements from what they sought to establish as a middle-class, family-oriented environment. Taste and social status are intertwined in very complicated ways.

Still more confusion arises when we slip between different meanings of taste. For example, in my chocolate experiment, I'm juxtaposing meanings one and three. All of this seems to point to yet another conundrum: the widespread idea that there is a right way to be eating and the constant moralizing about food.

DB: In an interesting contrast to what Warren was saying, I am more influenced by the questions of food studies than by the specifics of its insights. At the same time, I've struggled with how to teach transnational histories to students who desperately need them. I would say then that I began teaching food history as tangible—edible—ways into transnational history with the intent on drawing in Canadian, largely Asian immigrant students who might have felt disconnected from my classes in United States history. The university let me cook during lecture. And, I found rather quickly, that taste as part of the pedagogical/curricular process presented interesting challenges to students—even as the knife edge of “too much fun” loomed. As they dealt with and historicized their own contradictory relationships to taste in class, they were also balancing a particularly Canadian demand for “multiculturalist” identity protection and assimilationist food economies. Ironically enough, this has all led for me to an internalist turn. A class that offered transnational history is increasingly about taste. To that end, I'd challenge us to think a bit more, in terms of the classroom, about the relationship of food history to the histories of taste. . . and beyond. Smell? Sight?

Food History as Radical History

Food historians, in answering questions about the seriousness of our classes, grapple with the academic trajectories of radical history as well as with the popularity and prevalence of the new food politics. As we traced both frustration with the limitations of the contemporary “good food revolution” and recognition that it provided real opportunities in the classroom, we found ourselves jettisoning ideas of “radical history” in favor of history that can be radicalizing.

DB: I (and I suspect I share this with many here) emerged out of a long tradition of “radical history” that refused to disengage political mobilization from classroom teaching. In some ways, this might, I wonder, have created unintentional hierarchies that rendered interests of food something practiced outside the university. Still, I came back to food history as radical history. Partly this is because food was personal enough that my students could see connections between food and politics (by whatever definition) that they couldn't/didn't/wouldn't in other contexts.

How do we keep food radical in the classroom? Students know a great deal about recent food politics, for example, about eating local. Yet the line between food politics and food entertainment has been blurred, notably in television series about eating local challenges or in school lunch campaigns. Can we build upon this knowledge in teaching radical foodways?

WB: I started out doing food history because I was very interested in how radical movements are mainstreamed and diverted—the hegemonic process—and saw

the counter cuisine as a perfect case study.¹¹ My main teaching focus has been on tracing the links in the North American food chain. Once students start wanting to know where their food comes from and also begin to realize how hard it is to find that out, they become radicalized pretty quickly. I like Deborah Barndt's book (and course) on the "tomato trail."¹² I guess what frustrates me most about Michael Pollan's success is that he gets too much credit for doing what a whole lot of educators have been doing for a generation, starting perhaps with Joan Dye Gussow's *Feeding Web*.¹³ I also think we historians have much to teach in correcting, or at least complicating, the current nostalgia for the "local" and the "traditional," which has so many regressive implications.

JP: This may be a generational difference, but in contrast to Warren, I have been radicalized by studying food, not the other way around. Food is an area where the failures of classical liberal economic prescriptions are particularly striking. As Amartya Sen has taught us, during times of famine, laissez-faire policies will indeed restore markets to equilibrium, but they do so by condemning the most vulnerable groups to starve to death. I remind students who think of Africa as a starvation-ridden continent that Ireland was exporting wheat during the Great Potato Famine.

AB: I came to the study of food through an original interest in gender/feminist history, and in fact for me food (as it did for many feminists) seemed a decidedly unradical topic, but rather one that helped to keep women in prescriptive roles that contributed to the "problem that has no name." But I quickly realized that food (in terms of gender) didn't have to be oppressive but could also create a space for creativity and self-expression and radical transformation. Arlene Avakian's *Through the Kitchen Window*, a collection of articles about women and food, was for me a great example that the act of cooking can be oppressive, but also liberating and defiant, depending on the individual and context.¹⁴

The teaching of food history can be radical in many areas, both in food production (migrant labor, factory farming, critical analysis of farm subsidies) and in consumption (civil rights lunch counter sit-ins, Irish hunger strikes, vegetarian critiques of the food system). It's useful, I think, to complicate the issues so that students understand the complexity involved. Die-hard Slow Food enthusiasts are challenged by Rachel Laudan's article, "A Plea for Culinary Modernism: Why We Should Love the New, Fast, Processed Food," which raises questions of artisanal food production and worker exploitation, for example.¹⁵ There are writings that raise concerns about whether all that good organic locally produced food can or will be distributed equitably. It's challenging and rewarding to think about food in terms of competing goals: environmental health, social justice, ethics, and good healthy food as a right, pleasure, and deliciousness.

DB: I find something pretty interesting in what's emerging here. As someone trained as a labor historian, I was well versed in the ideas that "ordinary" things mattered. And some (like Roy Rosenzweig in his book on saloon culture) did find a place for things that were ingested. Still, there was (and probably still is) a professional culture that created binaries of serious topics (organizing, resistance, strikes) and the frivolous (consumption, dress, and leisure). In short, the serious and radical were defined in profoundly gendered ways. What I notice, though, is that, at least in the classroom, we have dispensed with the category of radical history in favor of "radicalizing history."

I have found my students well versed in the ideas (if not the names) of the new food politics. I have sometimes found this food politics an obstacle in class ("if I'm doing the right thing, myself, why do I need to think more?"). Other times it provides a way to think (like William Roseberry) about how popular food knowledge is constructed.¹⁶

Calories and Quality

The new food politics that inevitably influences our classes and the preconceptions of our students raises historical questions of quality. If we introduce ideas about "good food," do we discard academic approaches that attempted to measure caloric intake? Calorie counting, we recognized, has a trajectory that is both academic and global in its history. In considering the complex politics of calorie counting, we must also consider how to approach the social construction of the body and hunger, questions so crucial and personal to our students.

PS: In my PhD (1984), I was confronted with—can you imagine it?—qualitative issues. I was interested in the price and weight of bread, but not in its quality (or taste), until I realized that quality matters. Today this seems evident, but in the 1980s, it wasn't. It took me some more years to take a cultural turn (a paradigm shift isn't a light thing), which implied a (moderate) linguistic turn and, by all means, a poststructural turn. Anyway, around 1995, the struggle was over, and I tried to incorporate the economic, political, social, cultural, medical, technical, or whatever field in my historical research (Europe, since 1800). Food (I label it today [in Dutch] *eetcultuur* or eating culture) turned out to be the perfect way to try to achieve this integration.

JP: That's a really interesting point that historians had to rediscover the question of quality, because our sources are so vocal about it. Certainly in Mexico, health authorities in the nineteenth century (and even today) condemned the supposedly terrible nutritional quality and disgusting taste of the maize and chiles consumed by the peasants. Was the calorie counting of an earlier generation of scholars in part a reaction against these pseudo-scientific and ethnocentric reformers?

PS: I think the calorie-counting historians of the 1960s and '70s were primarily inspired by biologists, chemists, and other “real” (or hard) scientists. However, since hunger (mainly in the so-called Third World) was rediscovered in those years, it’s well possible that the calorie counting was seen as, indeed, an objective means against pseudo-scientific reformers.

EM: My hunch is that before the 1800s food aid was at best a “national” enterprise, organized by governments, churches, and similar organizations. The hungry people had a face in these earlier enterprises. They were fellow workers, fellow church members, and, once in a while, fellow citizens. People did not need calorie counting to see the hunger in these people. Calorie counting became a critical variable when the poor to be helped had no face: the countless citizens of the world, people beyond our borders. I think calorie counting since the nineteenth century represents our increasing awareness of the health problems arising from “overeating” (and obesity) in the affluent North and “undereating” in the impoverished South. India was among the first to enter the world stage as a country of hungry people, and it was soon followed by China especially during the 1920s and 1930s. Colonial Africa remained outside this club of the colonized and semicolonized hungry people. Indeed, British officials in Africa often congratulated themselves for ruling a continent not devastated by “famines” of the Indian order.

It was not until World War II that calorie counting began to address the problem of malnutrition in Africa. As often happens, the interest was European in origin: there was a big demand for “fats” in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Nutrition science came to Africa as part of the European problem. Thus, as calorie counting anthropologists roamed the villages, weighing the amount of flour women prepared for the daily meal, their cousins in the invigorated agriculture departments were busy promoting, sometimes peacefully and sometimes through naked force, soil-depleting cash crops, such as cotton, and protein-deficient food crops such as corn (maize) or manioc (cassava). And to satisfy the European demand for “fats,” officials devoted a considerable amount of their agricultural “development” projects to the growing of peanuts (groundnuts), palm oil, and so forth. The West enjoyed the “fats” and got increasingly large while villagers in Africa got undernourished and small.

But I think calorie counters in Africa have not fully recognized or resolved at least three conceptual problems: 1) reliance on the Western body as a standard of measurement; 2) the fact that in much of rural Africa the organized meal (another standard of measurement) constitutes only one source of one’s daily food intake; and 3) more important, the fact that among peasants eating is more than a two-way relationship (between food and the consumer): eating is a three-way process connecting food with the consumer in relation to other consumers. If you bring a loaf of bread to the table of three people, you cannot assume (as calorie counters must necessarily

do) that each takes a third of the loaf. Not so much the level of hunger as the power relationships among the three would determine who leaves the table with experiences of “hunger” and “satisfaction.” The table is a contested terrain, replicating in some ways the global division between those who need calorie counting because their stomachs are always full and those who need the same because their stomachs are always empty.

JP: The three conceptual problems that you conclude with raise some very interesting points for teaching through food. The ways we normalize the Western body, and one particular, modern variant of the Western body at that, leads to stigmatizing those who do not fit that image. Does body image have a place in the ways we teach about food? As obesity becomes recognized as a significant health problem, there is a dichotomy that seems to appear. Either we blame the food industry for providing too much energy-rich, overly processed foods, or alternately the government subsidies that encourage such production, or we blame the consumers who lack the will power to control themselves, or else their mothers who feed them too much. But is there another, more fruitful way to talk about these questions, and perhaps to address some very real health concerns, by looking at the social practices surrounding food, and how the sensory experiences of production and consumption are tied together?

AB: This discussion reminded me of the intersection of science, politics, and culture with regard to food (or the lack of it) in the nineteenth/twentieth centuries. I’m impressed with James Vernon’s *Hunger: A Modern History* and its take on hunger and famine in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁷ According to Vernon, the Irish Famine of the 1840s–50s gave rise to the “humanitarian discovery of hunger,” and hunger as a political critique not seen in an earlier era. The Irish famine challenged the prevailing model of causation that those who died of starvation were not lazy, morally inadequate human beings who without hunger would never learn how to labor; they were instead innocent victims of forces and events beyond their control. The change was partially due to an emerging popular press that told heartfelt personal stories of starvation and death, especially of women and children, connecting readers to those suffering as never before. Hunger became the basis for political tactics and critiques that exposed the claim of the modern state to care for its subjects as founded upon an act of original violence capable of reducing them to “bare life.” It was in India that famine became most fully identified with the failure of British rule. Hunger strikes in both Ireland and India valorized hunger as an indication of moral strength, not Malthusian weakness. I find discussing the Irish Famine within this context (empire, modernity, power) adds a powerful dimension.

The *Jungle* Paradigm

*Even if many of our students have experiences in the food industry, especially as restaurant or fast-food workers, contemporary food politics often privileges questions of consumption over those of production. Reaching all the way back to Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, we recognize that while food politics has often focused on consumer protection, food history still provides extraordinary opportunities to link consumer behavior with the very real experience of labor.*

DB: One of the elements of our discussions that has come up a few times already is the binary of food consumers/food workers. I have certainly found that this almost oppositional binary comes up in my classes—even in a class where a number of students each year work, in one way or another, in food production. Students tend toward thinking about food politics in terms of consumerism. Partly, this is about shock, which speaks, in interesting ways, to the body itself; they are appalled by the abuse of the stomach, but immune to the physical ravages of labor. Discussions of, for example, indentured labor on tea plantations leave them jaded and quiet, but the mere mention of adulteration of tea leaves always draws gasps.

How do we avoid leaving students with what might be termed “The *Jungle* paradigm”—the idea that the aim of food politics is toward more protection for consumers?⁹ How do we maintain in the classroom the linkages between histories of consumption and production that have been so central to foundational scholarship in the field?

AB: Dan, this is a good question, and speaks to the way one defines “food history.” When I think “food history,” I think “food” rather than “labor,” or “technology,” or “gender,” which I guess can have the result of lending itself more readily to the consumption end of the food chain. The graduate food history course I teach is built around commodities and cuisine, though famine is a main topic of study, and labor is usually part of the discussion. Sidney Mintz’s *Sweetness and Power* is a great example of a text explicitly linking production and slave labor with consumption among the English proletariat. Students really get it.

RA: Sometimes it is very difficult to engage “foodie”-type students (the ones who typically take our postgraduate program) over production issues, as they don’t identify with them in part because they are primarily consumers (or very high-end producers, such as chefs). So even when we include these issues, we sometimes get complaints that we are going too “political” with our discussions or too much toward “opinions” versus “history.” Undergraduates seem to engage a bit more with issues of production, for example, the effects of globalization on local production and farmers, perhaps in part because of a more general generational shift in awareness of issues of social justice.

In a world where few people are close to their sources of food production, how can we expose them to the issues associated with production in a way that is meaningful and likely to catch their interests, and without being sensationalistic or one-sided?

WB: My approach has always been to trace the links in the food chain, which invariably leads back to the farm, factory, and market. So in my “American Food” survey we look at “Harvest of Shame” and its numerous updates, as well as read about current farm labor organizing campaigns and issues. For the farm-to-factory phase I like to use books about animal production, including a nuanced view of dairy/meat farmers’ lives, as in Peter Lovenheim’s *Portrait of a Burger as a Young Calf*.¹⁸ Moving up the chain, since most of my students have worked in restaurants at some point, there’s quite a lot of first-person data to mine in this part of the course. I should say that before getting to production I start the course on the consumption side: students ponder their family meals and food memories. After about three weeks of encouraging them to ponder the magical/commensal aspects of food, I then hit them with the problematic costs of their banquet. History majors don’t generally like this unchronological approach, so we get very few of them. On the other hand, my engineers, philosophers, geographers, and other lost souls like it a lot.

Who Owns Food History?

Food means a lot to many of our students. How do we engage with the very personal investment that students have with the food they eat and with the traditions that they represent? If food is very personal, so, too, is it the “stuff” of popular culture. As many of us engage with global histories of food, we necessarily must confront a tendency in the popular culture of food to trend toward its racialized exoticizing. Still, in the end, part of the radicalizing history of food is developing students’ personal and political relationships to food.

DB: I have found in teaching food history two streams that often intersect and sometimes compete. First, I find that, especially in my largely immigrant campus, that food is something “owned.” In some ways it is easy ethnicity. Sometimes this translates into a kind of general reluctance to think about food as something other than traditional—and, therefore, timeless. On the other hand, they confront many ideas of food as fun and adventure. In the same restaurants they frequent with family, they sometimes confront “food adventurers.” I find this phenomenon, well, fascinating, especially as, in my own work, I am grappling with ideas about the exotic and its social construction.

So . . . let me pose two sets of interlocking questions: many students claim a great deal of “ownership” over food. For many of our students, food represents something very central to their own identity and personal sense of the past that they

can cling to as they negotiate their family history in new locations. For others, it provides them the sense of having roots. Food allows some students to become “ethnic again.” How do we negotiate the idea of food as a kind cultural currency yet still a vital part of cultural and ethnic histories?

The other side of the idea of “ownership” over food is the popularity of food as adventurous fun. In recent years, eating narratives have joined a long and problematic history of adventure writing. How do we grapple, in our teaching, with the cultural fascination with the exotic and the contemporary impulse toward courageous dining—especially when there is comparatively little scholarship accessible to undergraduates about non-Western foodways?

AB: Food is undeniably hip, particularly for many college students. I find college students taken by the importance of food in its entirety: social, political, environment, health, and nutrition aspects. For many Michael Pollan’s *Omnivore’s Dilemma* is sort of a touchstone text, similar maybe to Ginsberg’s “Howl” of an earlier generation. What I sometimes find challenging is getting them to move past simple nostalgia for Grandma’s baklava, cold sesame noodles, or tuna casserole, to linking those dishes and memories to larger issues of identity and politics, economics and culture. I do enjoy students’ relaying their warm feelings of nurture and family through food (a good first step to identifying food as central to human existence and socialization), but it is good to nudge them on a bit further to link those foods to broader structural concerns.

Also important is Dan’s second point about the potentially problematic nature of the current trend of “extreme” everything including food. Daring food TV hosts go to the ends of the earth to sample the most exotic and seemingly inedible foods, to the thrill and horror of their viewers. Invariably these feature non-Western countries, casting the “other” as strange and exotic, and thus privileging the (presumably American) viewer as “normal” and “not weird.” Though there are shows, such as “Diners, Drive-ins and Dives,” that highlight joints in the United States often featuring (what some might call) grotesque dishes or amounts of food, this genre casts that type of food in a positive light. What may be helpful here is the work of folklorist Lucy Long, *Culinary Tourism*, and philosopher Lisa Heldke, *Exotic Appetites*.¹⁹ Both try to untangle the political and cultural meanings inherent in value judgments applied to food: exotic/familiar, palatable/unpalatable. I find that both Long’s and Heldke’s work really helps students understand that what is “weird” and what is “normal” depends on where one stands in relation, and has very real political, cultural, and economic implications.

WB: This discussion of hipness, adventure, and exoticism intrigues me because I see so little of it among my suburban Baltimore students, even in recent years. Even the immigrants’ children, of which there are many, are quite assimilated to fast food

and have little interest in cooking or their ethnic past. In other words, I'm dealing with a pretty blank slate.

JP: My students come in with a strong interest in food, although their ideas about food can be very different. A lot of my students come from the college of food and agriculture, and they can have a very technical approach (and they let me know it when I make mistakes, which is a good thing). Others are young foodies, and I even get a few nontraditional students who have worked in professional kitchens. I find the discussions between these groups to be very productive, particularly around those hot-button political questions of local agriculture, fast food, and the like.

DB: It is interesting, as well, to think about the long life of our classes. If food is personal, what do students “take out” from our classes? What remains and what is discarded?

AB: I decided that instead of my trying to answer the question I would pose the query to students in my classes over the last couple of semesters (all graduate students). One food history student found reading Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*²⁰ (used at the beginning of the semester to examine the transition from foraging to agricultural societies) “huge for me — I'd never been exposed to ideas about how cooking and eating so powerfully shaped the development of human culture. It was a testament to the profound importance of the discipline of food studies,” she wrote. Another student, from the “Food Systems/Agriculture” course, was struck by how quickly small farms and meat processors went out of business with the development of the transcontinental railroad systems, as detailed by William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis*.²¹ All, I think, point to the way food so beautifully combines the material world with ideological intention and force to drive events and phenomena. Food's everydayness makes it on one hand invisible, but on the other hand all powerful. As a teacher, it is quite gratifying to reflect on these moments.

JP: One of the exercises I like to do at the beginning of the semester is hand out little packets of hunter-gatherer trail mix, basically every little seed (flax, poppy, sesame, pumpkin, etc.) I can find at my co-op (and even that is cheating, of course, since some of these are domesticated, such as the pumpkin). Then on the last day of class, I give them an industrial trail mix of things made out of maize (corn chips, corn flakes, popcorn, gummy bears, candy corn, etc.) and ask them to compare the two.

PS: In one of my classes (postgraduates from all over the world), I ask each student to write a very short essay about food that makes them “what they are.” Students

talk/write about dishes, restaurants, food museums, drinks, feasts, et cetera. We eat and drink (indeed, alcohol). A Bulgarian student talked/wrote about an apple as a distinct marker of national identity. Reaction in the classroom: apples are to be found everywhere! The Bulgarian student made it clear that, when she was young, apples in her country were one of the only foodstuffs that were available and not expensive. Furthermore, one could turn apples into a great variety of food and drink (I had no idea what could be done with a simple apple!). The classroom went quiet, realizing that the significance of a foodstuff in one time and period may be totally different from another time and place. Nice.

Second anecdote. A Greek student presented a talk about “Greek coffee,” claiming it was the best and strongest in the world. After five minutes, his Turkish colleague shouted that he was totally wrong, and that this coffee was known as “Turkish coffee” all over the world. Again, nice. Then followed a huge discussion (and not just between Greeks and Turks) about the long-term history of coffee, neglecting totally that both Greece and Turkey once were part of the Ottoman Empire. Arguing this (by me), didn’t solve the “conflict.” Behind the coffee discussion was of course the lasting political tension between the two nations. Food = politics.

Notes

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