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Sustenance, Abundance, and the Place of Food in U.S. Histories

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Food is at the base of human existence and has long been a part of the historical record, but only in the last couple of decades has food been a major focus of study in the United States. While in the past historians would undoubtedly have agreed that food is at the base of civilizations (recall, for example, the old adages "An army moves on its stomach" and "Tell me what you eat; I will tell you who you are"), most would have regarded food as too trivial to be at the center of a serious field of study. Thus, the idea that food has a history worth documenting remained largely unacknowledged by most academic historians, though it lay embedded in the more established subdisciplines of history: economic, political, and, more recently, social and cultural history. Even today one is hard-pressed to find a sustained discussion of food in mainstream college and high school U.S. history textbooks. For even as food history and the broader field of food studies have gained momentum in recent years, in some traditional academic circles food history remains secondary, originally because of the deep association of food with the domestic (and thus female) sphere, and also because of its more recent alliance with the field of popular culture. This chapter examines the historiography of food in U.S. history, charting its growth and development, including the tensions regarding recognition. These tensions are not without irony, given that the conflicts over and ideas about the overwhelming American abundance of material resources, including food, have been such a driving force in U.S. history.

Food History: Origins, Antecedents, and Definitions

"Food history" in the United States overlaps and intersects with other related topics, including histories of agriculture, the environment, nutrition, health, technology, and culture. Although consumption has been the primary focus of food history, it is also an umbrella term covering agriculture, culinary history, nutrition and diet, environmental history, commodities, and technology, among others. While "food" remained on the periphery of academic historical scholarship until recently, "agriculture" was a fairly regular topic of interest for gentlemen of letters and early historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Later, in the early to mid-twentieth century, food mainly functioned as an indistinctive backdrop through which to examine, for

example, labor relations (workers in canning factories and slaughterhouses), agrarian political movements (the Grange movement), or industrialization (the rise of food-processing conglomerates).

It has become more acceptable to explore the lives of everyday people, including women and minorities. This, combined with the rise in cultural history—especially that which explores consumption in all its forms—created an atmosphere in which formerly mundane and seemingly irrelevant topics, including food, were deemed worthy of scholarly historical inquiry. In retrospect, it is surprising that it took such a long time for food-centered history to emerge. After all, not only does everyone have to eat (and ideally several times daily) to survive, but great civilizations, both ancient and modern, meticulously recorded by traditional history, have essentially risen and fallen according to rulers' abilities to feed their people.

While food history is a subdiscipline of history, it is also positioned within "food studies," food-focused interdisciplinary research grounded in the humanities and soft social sciences. Food studies has distinct and important antecedents in a number of disciplines, including anthropology and folklore, fields that have long regarded the study of food as key to understanding cultures and societies and the lives of individuals. Anthropologists including Audrey Richards, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Mary Douglas, and Marvin Harris all wrote extensively and perceptively about the place of food in diverse cultures.[1] Folklorists, including Donald Yoder, who is credited with coining the term *foodways*, approached food as material culture in its vernacular settings in the United States.[2] Amateur and professional cookbook writers and food journalists focusing on cuisine, ingredients, and cooking techniques have been vital to the development of food studies scholarship. Libraries that once refused or self-consciously maintained cookbook collections are now proudly developing and promoting them, and correspondingly receiving large numbers of researchers.[3]

While tending to be more focused on food consumption than production, food studies also owes a debt to the many biologists, food activists, nutritionists, and rural social scientists who have focused on food production. Generally more oriented toward the sciences and hard social sciences and quantitative methods, these scholars speak in terms of "food systems," chains of institutions, processes, and peoples linking the production of food with its distribution. They tend to concentrate on the relations of food production to economics, the environment, and human nutrition yet increasingly have recognized the importance of understanding food in its social, cultural, and historical contexts.

Food within Traditional U.S. Historiography

From the colonial era on, Americans have recorded the histories of their communities, but food, while tremendously important to these early communities, was not a prominent feature in the written record. Colonial leaders John Smith and William

Bradford, for example, compiled "city on a hill" records of their settlements, and others created narratives that provided providential evidence for Europeans' migration and eventual creation of successful settlements in the New World. Food was, of course, critically important to the settlers as is evident from George Percy's account of the Virginia colonists' "starving time" and the draconian measures, as recorded by William Strachey, meted out in the face of desperation, violence, and even cannibalism.[4] Similarly, William Bradford's brief mention of a Pilgrim/Native American feast of "thanksgiving" notwithstanding, overall food production and consumption were largely omitted from these early historical accounts.[5] Neither the record keepers nor the more official historians of the period focused much on documenting information about food.

Nineteenth-century Romantic-era histories, such as those of George Bancroft and Francis Parkman, gave food even less attention, even though their sweeping grand narratives presented an optimistic vision of American progress built on the economics and politics of abundance.[6] The next school of historians overlooked food as well. The early twentieth-century progressive strain in American history, led by such historians as Charles Beard, Frederick Jackson Turner, Vernon Parrington, and Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., steered away from the earlier grand romantic narratives, focusing instead on conflict.[7] Inspired by the reform impulses occurring at the time of their writing, the progressives were concerned with larger themes of class conflict, economic interpretations of the Constitution, and, in Turner's case, the ways in which Americans and their institutions were shaped by the frontier and its closing.[8]

These historians simply did not see food as central to national development, especially as compared with other topics: politics, class conflict, economics, international trade and relations, religious and intellectual movements, and scientific discoveries. While food is embedded in all of these subjects, perhaps because of its ephemeral and domestic nature (an issue discussed in detail later), or perhaps because of food's visceral sensuality and its intimate connection with bodies and bodily functions, food consumption was neglected as a topic fit for serious historical inquiry. Further, historians of this era (knowingly or not) took a "great man" approach to historical events: that men—men in nearly all cases—because of some element of their character (bravery, charisma, integrity) are the primary cause in determining a course of events. While some early histories more grounded in economics or influenced by Darwinism,[9] for example, analyzed events in broader structural terms, it would be several decades before the great-man approach was effectively challenged.

When food did appear as a subject of historical scholarship, it tended to be in the form of production (agriculture and to a lesser extent processing) rather than consumption. To illustrate in quantitative terms, a survey of the flagship U.S. history journal, the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, revealed that from 1914, the journal's beginning, to 1964 (when the *MVHR* became the *Journal of American History*, which remains the American history journal of record) agriculture as a topic heavily outweighed the topic of food consumption. In that fifty-year period, 32 journal articles and 115 book reviews featured agriculture and food processing, while only 2 articles and 8 book reviews focused on food and food consumption.[10] Indeed, historians were interested enough in agricultural history that it was able to sustain its own organization and professional journal. In the early twentieth century, a group of employees at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) formed the Agricultural History Society. Scholarship in the society's journal, *Agricultural History*, has until the late twentieth century tended to focus on such traditional topics as agricultural economics, crop production, and agrarian political movements.[11]

Prior to World War II, a few exceptions to the absence of food-centered studies dot the historiographical landscape. The most prominent example, Richard O. Cummings's *The American and His Food: A History of Food Habits in the United States* (1940), grew out of Cummings's training in the history of science and technology. Cummings explained that while writing a dissertation on the history of the American ice industry he "looked for a work on diet but found that the subject had been neglected by historians."[12] *The American and His Food*, a history of food and nutrition in the United States up to 1940, told a sweeping tale of colonial and early republic history mainly focused on changes in the food supply as a result of scientific and technological developments and the subsequent effects of these changes on Americans' nutrition. A reviewer of the book wondered why no one had written such a book before: "Since written history is supposed to survey everything that has concerned man, the history of food should have some place in general accounts and special studies. One might wonder why more attention has not been given to it in the past since so much of man's primary activity is directed to the securing of food, shelter, and clothing."[13] Despite the reviewer's acknowledgment of neglect and Cummings's important study, the field did not take off. Indeed, *The American and His Food* was perhaps the only academic history of food in the United States for several decades, and it served as a model for later books covering the same terrain.

After World War II: Midcentury Consensus History

In the mid-twentieth century historians began to take more notice of the role of food in American historical scholarship. The dominant zeitgeist of the period, commonly known as "consensus history," tended to focus on Americans' common attributes and experiences, what citizens might have in common rather than the class or cultural differences featured by the progressive historians of an earlier generation.[14] Influenced by Cold War anxieties, consensus historians found a natural contrast, for example, between U.S. politics and culture and that of its rival, the Soviet Union, a contrast that minimized differences among Americans themselves and accentuated American abundance and plenty. The "melting pot" metaphor popular in the early twentieth century found renewed popularity, and, combined with an emboldened

postwar notion of American exceptionalism, consensus historians often struck a celebratory tone. Yet largely as a result of the two World Wars and advances in transportation and communications, scholarship in this period frequently exhibited an element of cosmopolitanism as well, an awareness of the place of the United States within a larger world.

Though food is not a central component of consensus history, two prominent consensus historians, Daniel Boorstin and David Potter, featured food in their historical analyses. Boorstin, perhaps the most prominent, if not the most popular, consensus historian of the period spent a dozen years as the librarian of Congress after having taught history at the University of Chicago for twenty-five years. His three-volume series, *The Americans* (which won major awards including the Bancroft, Parkman, and Pulitzer prizes), highlighted the importance of food as a fairly significant component of U.S. growth and development. The genius of American citizens, Boorstin argued, was their pragmatism, which was produced in part as a result of the landscape and material conditions in which they lived and was therefore not necessarily reproducible in other countries. In the second volume, for example, Boorstin used food as an example of the democratic nature of mass production as canning, shipping, and mass production of meat resulted in overall better diets for Americans.[15]

Similarly, Potter's well-known 1954 study, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character*, employed a material analysis of what used to be unselfconsciously called the "American character." Potter, in part writing against the progressivists, argued that the United States and its citizens have been shaped, blessed, and at times intellectually and socially hindered by inhabiting one of the most resource-rich and economically successful countries in the world. *People of Plenty* was one of the first studies to connect American abundance to several phenomena, including increased mobility, decreased emphasis on community, advertising, individualism, and the distinct nature of American democracy, including the illusion of classlessness. Careful to develop how abundance shapes individuals as well as society, Potter articulated—and saw as related—the enormous impact of abundance in both the public and private spheres. Potter argued that the long history of abundance in the United States—a product of both natural resources and technological innovation—profoundly shaped the American character and outlook. He described the country's vast natural resources, its large expanses of seemingly uninhabited land perceived as inexhaustible and available for the taking, impressive industrial and scientific advances, and (at his time) the world's highest per capita income, caloric consumption, and agricultural output. Noting that the average American consumed 3,186 kilocalories daily (or that this number of calories was theoretically available in the food supply), Potter characterized the American diet as "unquestionably the highest nutritional standard in the world."[16] World War II for Potter illuminated the idea that for those living elsewhere in the world, the promise of America was not its abstract ideals of democracy but its concrete realities, symbolized by, among other items, an abundance of food.

The 1980s: Food History Emerges

In contrast to the consensus history of the 1950s, the 1960s set in motion a period of great intellectual, social, and cultural upheaval. Spurred on by the successes of the African American civil rights movement, other marginalized groups asserted their rights to equality under the law, access to opportunity, and social acceptance in society. Further, in the 1970s many Americans assumed a post-Vietnam, post-Watergate distrust of government and of institutions in general. Baby boomers, now college-aged, experimented with creative alternatives to the social status quo, and the United States witnessed dramatic changes with regard to sexual mores, music, fashion, cultural expression, and ideology. Women and minorities asserted their right to what previously had been the purview of mainly white middle- and upper-class males, including employment opportunities, higher education, and political office. The personal had indeed become the political. These dramatic social movements helped foster a new paradigm for historical scholarship—a transformation of the notion of who and what, for example, was an acceptable topic for academic study. Whereas in earlier generations "history" meant the stories of powerful men and powerful institutions, the new social history of the 1960s and 1970s shifted the focus to the lives of ordinary people. This, combined with previously marginalized groups' assertions of distinctiveness and neglect in historical accounts, led to the possibilities of new histories yet to be written.

The French *Annales* school should also be credited for having decades earlier understood food as integral in uncovering the history of European peoples from the Middle Ages onward. World systems historians, including Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein, employed political-economic analysis to understand food as a commodity and as vital to daily subsistence across the centuries.[17] Thus, greater awareness of the private sphere and the seemingly mundane opened the door to food as a more legitimate topic of inquiry. Robert Forster and Orest A. Ranum's 1979 *Food and Drink in History*, a book comprised of food-focused articles originally published in the journal *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, contains articles with such titles as "The Family Pig of the *Ancien Régime*," and "The Art of Using Leftovers, Paris, 1850–1900." Also included in this volume was Roland Barthes's notable semiotics analysis, "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption."[18]

In addition to social transformations, the 1970s witnessed a growing environmental movement, which fostered food history via the emerging topic of environmental history. World historian Alfred Crosby's book *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (1972), focused on the environmental effects of sustained exchange between Eurasia and Africa (the "Old World") and the Americas (the "New World"). While Crosby focused on how the transfer of people, plants, animals, and germs worked to the planet's detriment, not benefit, two central chapters focus in detail on the plants and animals that made their way across

the Atlantic Ocean from one continent to the other (going both directions, west to east and east to west), leading to dramatic changes with regard to nutrition, culture, and cuisine as well as the environment. While more recent scholarship has refined, further developed, and in some cases refuted parts of Crosby's scholarship, *The Columbian Exchange* was pathbreaking in method and argument and is still a mainstay of American food history writing.

In addition to environmentally centered attention to food history, this period assumed a more cosmopolitan attitude and aesthetic that left its mark on the still-incipient field of food studies. Inspired in part by Jackie Kennedy's attention to French haute cuisine, educated housewives bought Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* and engaged in what Betty Fussell describes as "competitive home cooking."[19] The boom in appreciation for and experimentation with French cuisine extended to the cuisines of other countries. In the 1970s Time-Life publishers launched a series of cookbooks, *Foods of the World.* While reviewers pointed to shortcomings and inaccuracies, the series became immensely popular among a growing affluent, educated middle class that had traveled or was at least interested in re-creating cuisines and tastes from abroad.[20] In addition, several volumes covered American regional foodways. Volumes such as *American Cooking: Creole & Acadian* (1971) and *American Cooking: The Northwest* (1970) helped Americans regain an appreciation for the indigenous foods and cultures of their country as having value and importance.[21]

Culinary historians, both amateur and professional, flexed their muscles as they cast a critical eye at the increasingly industrialized food in the United States. Culinary historian Karen Hess, with her husband, *New York Times* food critic John L. Hess, in their book *The Taste of America* (1977) blasted the "fancy" food in the United States and celebrated the "real" regional cuisines and dishes of the country. Also, a new hybrid, the historical cookbook, was gaining momentum. Part history book, part cookbook, the genre appealed to a public interested in food and dining. Betty Fussell's *Masters of American Cookery—M.F.K. Fisher, James Andrews Beard, Raymond Craig Claiborne, Julia McWilliams Child* (1983) offered a new kind of "great man" narrative of American food and dining history. Fussell's *I Hear America Cooking: The Cooks, Regions, and Recipes of American Regional Cuisine* (1984), a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, took a more folkloristic approach to American regional cuisine.[22] These books showed that there was a popular audience eager for accessible, creative histories of food.

Against the backdrop of the growing interest in things culinary, the mid- to late 1980s can be thought of as the first "wave" of substantial U.S. food history by trained historians and social scientists. Food emerged as a focus of serious attention, the result of a maturing social history movement, women's history, and feminist scholarship that was expanding in breadth and depth, combined with the so-called cultural turn in history, which employed linguistic theory to explore the importance of beliefs and assumptions and their causal role in group behavior. Several strong

food-focused histories were published in the mid- to late 1980s, all of which were in part products of the current intellectual and social milieu. The authors creatively employed methodologies from various disciplines to craft rich cultural and social histories of food.

Deeply influenced by the civil rights movement and the 1960s "rediscovery" of hunger in America, in 1986 social historian Janet Poppendieck published *Breadlines Knee Deep in Wheat: Food Assistance in the Great Depression.* Poppendieck sought to tell the story of hunger in America during the Great Depression through chronicling of government assistance programs, particularly farm programs such as the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), which attempted to prop up the failing agricultural system. Demonstrating the paradox of so many hungry Americans amid such agricultural (over)abundance, *Breadlines* was ultimately also a book about food as seen through the lens of 1960s radicalism. In stark contrast to the consensus historians' unifying "national character," the book vividly recounts iconic Depression moments, such as the bulldozing of tons of edible grain and the slaughtering of thousands of pigs—while one-third of the nation was without adequate food—in attempts to stabilize food prices, which had dropped so dramatically in the 1930s that it threatened to bring the food system to a collapse. Ultimately viewing these government programs as a failure, *Breadlines* ended on a pessimistic note—the government programs of an abundant nation failed to adequately feed its citizens.

Warren James Belasco's 1989 book *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took On the Food Industry* came from a similar perspective. Like Poppendieck, Belasco offered a criticism of the consensus narrative of abundance. Belasco, an American studies scholar whose first book was on car culture, realized that food was an equally powerful force in twentieth-century American culture. In *Appetite for Change,* part history and part autobiography, Belasco, a product of the baby boom and participant in the counterculture about which he wrote, examines how food became an effective and compelling countercultural movement through such experiments as communes, food co-ops, vegetarian restaurants, and cookbooks. However, Belasco recounts pessimistically that ethnic food, vegetarian items, and even yogurt and herbal tea were ultimately co-opted and smoothed over by a corporate culture looking to make a buck off the new tastes, flavors, and dishes of the counterculture.

Despite some feminists' initial reluctance, the strong influence of the women's movement on academic scholarship contributed greatly to the rise and development of food history in the 1980s and 1990s. The first wave of women's history in the 1970s and 1980s mainly attempted to write women back into history, to tell the stories of women in prominent positions who were previously ignored or underappreciated—a sort of "great women in history" response to traditional history. Early feminist historians were not attracted to such domestic subjects as food and the kitchen—topics, after all, that many felt had limited women's talents and opportunities. Yet female daily involvement with food was so central to women's experience for so long that it was ultimately, and eventually, fertile ground for feminist scholars.

Independent historian and journalist Laura Shapiro, influenced by the feminist movement, originally sought to write a biography of Fannie Farmer, the prominent Bostonian who published the popular *Fannie Farmer Cookbook* (1896). Upon realizing there was not quite enough material for a full biography, Shapiro realized food was clearly the central focus. "[The story] was all about food," she remembered later, "and the food was so mysterious, so inexplicable. I looked at menu after menu, recipe after recipe, and kept thinking to myself, why? Why are they cooking this way? What appeals to them? Why are they putting four saltines around a fruit salad and tying it all up with a ribbon? And gradually I started to figure it out by putting women's lives to bear on the food in front of them."[23] The result was her 1986 book, *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century.* In addition to the book's recognition in the popular press, the *Journal of American History*'s review was laudatory. Commenting specifically on Shapiro's cultural analysis of food, cultural historian William Leach noted, "Shapiro's extended and brilliant homage to white sauce alone makes the book worth its price. Used to blanket and to 'subjugate' all forms of food, from chicken to alfalfa greens, white sauce epitomized the ideological thrust of germ-free blandness."[24]

That the review appeared at all in the *Journal of American History* is significant, for in a period when few books on the history of food consumption were being written, let alone reviewed by an academic journal, it indicates that such a topic had begun to be acknowledged by the gatekeepers of the profession. While *Perfection Salad* was not universally well received (dietitians felt slighted by the book's poking gentle fun at the profession), such attention to a book about food and women was notable. Other important works of food history emerged through the portal of women's history. Joan Jacobs Brumberg's 1988 book, *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa,* employed cultural analysis to write a book about the power and importance of food—and the refusing of it—for young women in the Victorian era. Rima Apple's 1987 *Mothers and Medicine: A Social History of Infant Feeding, 1890–1950,* employed food, in this case artificial infant formulas and infant feeding, to understand more about women's lives and the role of technology, advertising, and the medical profession on infant feeding.[25]

Perhaps the most influential food history book of the 1980s is Sidney Mintz's 1985 *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History.* A cultural history of the production and consumption of sugar, *Sweetness and Power,* while not solely about the United States, was central to the development of U.S. food history. Mintz, an anthropologist, extensively detailed and analyzed the transatlantic production and consumption of sugar from the colonial era through the mid-twentieth century, weaving into the story economics, colonization, industrialization, cultural meanings of sugar and their alteration over time, nutrition and health, and issues of class and race. Mintz deftly and inextricably linked the Caribbean slaves who planted, harvested, and processed the sugar to the British working classes who, as the backbone of the Industrial Revolution, consumed vast quantities of that sugar as a significant portion of their daily caloric intake.

Further, Mintz made remarkable use of a wide variety of sources, including recipe books from the British Library. This fact made at least one reviewer regard the book as less legitimate for using such "trivial" domestic sources.[26] Finally, Mintz's book was unique in that it put an edible commodity squarely at the center of the work and examined it from all angles, using multiple methods and theoretical frameworks. Though it was not unheard of to write about a specific food before *Sweetness and Power,*[27] Mintz's book legitimized the practice and dozens of single-food histories have been published since, especially within the last decade.[28]

Mintz's work bore influence from the burst of multidisciplinary scholarship on the history of slavery in the United States and elsewhere. Others in this area picked up on the importance of food as well, including the folklorist Charles Joyner in his 1986 book *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community.* Building on slavery scholarship that sought to connect American slaves with their cultures in Africa, Joyner examined the cultural practices and religious beliefs of Carolina slaves (religion, folktales, housing, metalwork) and linked them to their antecedents in Africa. Joyner focused on foods (yams, rice, collard greens) and foodways (growing, threshing, and preparation methods) inherited from Africa, a theme geographer Judith Carney further developed in her 2001 book *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas.*

Also a part of the 1980s food history scholarship was Harvey Levenstein's general history of U.S. food. While a couple of U.S. food histories had been published in the decades since Cummings's 1940 *The American and His Food,*[29] Levenstein's 1988 *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* provided a needed updating and further development of the story of the American landscape of food. Levenstein, a social historian by training, surveyed the importance of food in the United States from the 1880s to the 1930s. (His companion book published in 2002, *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America,* continued the narrative through the end of the twentieth century.) Levenstein's insightful description, combined with a wealth of alternately humorous and sobering anecdotes and its wide array of information about food in modern U.S. society, made for a stimulating glimpse into American culture. *Revolution at the Table* managed to take food in the United States seriously but was critical enough to note its ironies, including an abundance of food that led to an ethos of quantity over quality, and Americans' sometimes blind devotion to the latest scientific theory that dictated what and how to eat.

Finally, in addition to social movements and the new social history, the development of cultural studies, which employs linguistic and literary theory to analyze both historical and contemporary phenomena, was also important to 1980s food scholarship. Just as Mintz employed cookbooks and recipes as legitimate primary sources, the idea of recipes as cultural texts gained legitimacy in this first wave of food history. Postmodernist theory allowed scholars to "read" any number of objects and artifacts as texts: chairs, musical instruments, and buildings, as well as food and recipes. Cookbooks, however, especially community cookbooks, took somewhat

longer to be regarded as serious historical artifacts. Attitudes gradually began to change, in part aided by literary scholar Susan Leonardi's 1989 article "Recipes for Reading: Summer Pasta, Lobster à la Riseholme, and Key Lime Pie." Exploring the changing texts and contexts of subsequent editions of the *Joy of Cooking*, Leonardi demonstrated that recipes are a highly embedded discourse and that they also have a social context. Wondering aloud if they might exhibit a "female" discourse as well, Leonardi demonstrated such an approach through her conversational style and placement of herself as a cook squarely within the pages of the article. This piece had a galvanizing effect on food studies scholarship in that it provided solid justification as well as a template for using recipes as texts. Although other articles employing recipes and cookbooks as texts had been published,[30] Leonardi's article garnered an enthusiastic and sustained reception. Anne Bower's 1997 collection of essays on women and cookbooks, *Recipes for Reading: Community Cookbooks, Stories, Histories*, was a direct acknowledgment of Leonardi's work.[31]

The Turn of the Twenty-First Century: Food History Reaches Critical Mass

In recent decades we have witnessed an emerging food "revolution" that has attempted to counter (or at least circumvent) the worst aspects of the industrialization of food and its abundance of cheap, highly processed food. Those involved in the current food revolution have worked to demonstrate the connection between good food and sustainable agricultural practices and to create better-tasting, higher-quality food for restaurants and home consumption. Scholarly and political attention to food matters has deepened as the field of food studies has developed and as popular books by Eric Schlosser, Marion Nestle, and Michael Pollan, combined with films such as Morgan Spurlock's *Supersize Me* (2004), have exposed an interested public to the questionable practices of the food industry and the government's willingness to accommodate food-industry demands.[32] Add to the mix the boom in culinary tourism, restaurants, food television, books, magazines, cooking classes, artisanal products, and the search for "authentic" cuisine of every sort—as well as rooftop gardening, locavores, and freegan dumpster diving—and the result is a surfeit of interest and anxiety about food in America.

These phenomena have produced considerable interest in food studies as an academic field. Similarly, food history in the United States reached a new critical mass in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As U.S. history in general, social and cultural history, and the histories of material culture, popular culture, ethnicity, and race increased in popularity, so did histories of non-Western countries and populations. A long and varied list of food histories emanated from all of these subfields and more: social/labor history;[33] science and technology;[34] agricultural history;[35] women's/gender history;[36] race and ethnicity;[37] and cultural history and the history of consumption in its broadest sense.[38] Several university presses began their own food series, including University of Illinois, University of California, and Columbia University. In addition to the publications of several food encyclopedias and multivolume food histories,[39] numerous food histories were written foremost with a general audience in mind, yet another further indication of food scholarship entering the realm of mainstream history (both popular and scholarly).[40]

While much of the recent food history could be regarded as part of "first-stage" scholarship, there are many works that have gone beyond this initial stage and provided interesting, complex interpretations and perspectives. This includes the complexities of organic agriculture and its effects on small farms and migrant workers,[41] the documentation of the growing sense of nationalism that emerged among the colonists through a shared sense of consumption,[42] or the exploration of a similar "language of shared goods" during the lunch counter sit-ins of the civil rights era (which was being fought over: the right to sit, be served, and drink a Coca-Cola was not trivial but highly significant).[43] Similarly, in food history within the context of gender are works that show how food has multiple meanings for women, lending complexity to the relationship between women and food.[44]

Another compelling theme of current food history scholarship centers on whether a "national" cuisine exists in the United States. While some squarely point to hot dogs and hamburgers as the national unifying dishes, others point to more complex formulas and historical incidents, combined with industrialization and recent immigration, as developing a more intricate cuisine.[45] Others are quite insistent that there has never been and cannot ever be such a thing as an "American cuisine" and insist instead that cuisine lies at the geographical level of region as opposed to nation.[46] History/cookbook hybrids have also reached a new maturity, being published with different purposes in mind: cook-friendly collections of recipes with some history, or as more of a rigorous ethnography and history of a region and cuisine, with accompanying recipes, whose main purpose is to document dying traditions.[47]

Conclusion

The constant popularity of food history for the general reader and the proliferation of amateur historians writing and publishing food histories makes for a rich and interesting mix, though not without some tension. Over the decades, culinary historians (largely nonacademic) have produced a fair amount of culinary history that has mainly gone unnoticed (or ignored) by professional historians, in part because of the seemingly irrelevant nature of the topic, but also in some part because of the (perceived or real) amateurish quality of work. This potential tension between amateur and professional standards and conventions of historical scholarship is not new, nor is it uncommon in the broader landscape of historical scholarship.

Further, debates and divides exist among academic historians themselves over standards of evidence, thoroughness of research, historical claims, and uses of theory to inform empirical data. Cultural history, for example, as well as the study of popular culture, has been received by historians with varying degrees of enthusiasm. The history profession was thrown into somewhat of a crisis as postmodernism challenged positivism and empirical methods. Historians have gradually become more comfortable experimenting with new methods and theories and have also gradually accepted as legitimate topics those previously considered too mundane, such as food, though to many the topic still smacks of amateurism.

Finally, one historian, whose area of expertise is outside of food history, wonders if there is a high cost to developing a narrow, "laser-like focus" on food, "the cost of rendering it hermetic." For example, when one is writing about women and cookbooks, she posits, it may be difficult to resist the tendency to essentialize the relationship between women and food, to see it in gendered terms without critical analysis. Employing "frameworks that cut across cultural forms," argues Kathy Peiss, "would be a more fruitful approach."[48]

For these reasons it remains to be seen whether traditional history departments in the United States will ultimately embrace food history as a totality. Given current debates concerning food safety, global environmentalism, and the effect of food production on indigenous peoples and cultures worldwide, and with Americans' renewed interest in high-quality, minimally processed food, culinary tourism, and fine dining, combined with ever-rising rates of obesity and its adverse consequences, it is clear that food history as a focus of both scholarly and popular inquiry is a topic that is here to stay.[49]

Notes

1. Richards, 1939; Lévi-Strauss, 1970; Douglas, 1972; M. Harris, 1975.
2. Yoder, 1972.
3. Barron, 2011.
4. Percy, 1907; Strachey, 1969.
5. Bradford, 1856; see also LaCombe, 2012.
6. Bancroft, 1878; Parkman, 1869.
7. Beard, 1913; Turner, 1921; Parrington, 1927; Schlesinger, 1918.
8. Boyer, 2001.
9. Fiske, 1892.
10. Examples of topics include agricultural biographies, water/irrigation, agricultural policy, politics, economics, agrarianism, farm labor, plantation (slave) labor, ranching, dairying, fishing industries, sheep (whaling, salmon, oysters), sugar, rice, corn, farm and harvesting technology, and the wine, meat-packing, and fruit industries. On the consumption side, topics include the general history of food consumption, restaurants, rum, alcohol, tea, grocery stores, vitamins, pigs, chocolate, and cookbooks.
11. Later the Agricultural History Society, as with all historical subdisciplines, evolved with the times; Danbom, 2010. Thanks to Brian Cannon for the reference.
12. Cummings, 1940, v.
13. Boudreau, 1942, 432.
14. Boyer, 2001.
15. Boorstin, 1973.
16. Potter, 1954, 83.
17. Braudel, 1981; Wallerstein, 1974.
18. Forster and Ranum, 1973.
19. Fussell, 2000.
20. Claiborne, 1968.
21. Book titles include *American Cooking: Creole & Acadian*; *American Cooking: The Eastern Heartland*; *American Cooking: The Great West*; *American Cooking: The Melting Pot*; *American Cooking: New England*; *American Cooking: The Northwest*; *American Cooking: Southern Style*.
22. For an important folklore perspective see Camp, 1989.
23. Correspondence with Shapiro; notes in author's possession.
24. Leach, 1986, 785.
25. See also Curren, 1989.
26. Roxborough, 1986, 575. See also Bentley, 2008.
27. Salaman, 1949.
28. E.g., Coe and Coe, 1996; Edge, 2006; Fussell, 1992; Jenkins, 2000; Kurlansky, 1997; Smith, 1994.
29. Hooker, 1981; Root and De Rochemont, 1976.
30. For example, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1987.
31. The material culture of food and dining are also important at this time. See Grover, 1988.
32. Schlosser, 2001; Nestle, 2002; Pollan, 2006; Spurlock, 2004.
33. Rothenberg, 2000.
34. Horowitz, 2006; Cronon, 1991; Belasco and Scranton, 2002.
35. Guthman, 2004; Stoll, 2002; Horwitz, 1998; Fitzgerald, 2003.
36. Bentley, 1998; Theophano, 2003; Parkin, 2006.
37. Cinotto, 2001; Cinotto, 2008; Diner, 2001; Gabaccia, 2000.
38. Trubek, 2008; Tower, 2004; Neustadt, 1992.
39. Smith, 2004; Katz and Weaver, 2002; Parasecoli and Scholliers, 2011.
40. Kuh, 2001; Kamp, 2006.
41. Guthman, 2004.
42. Breen, 2004.
43. Weiner, 1996.

44. Avakian, 1997; Williams-Forson, 2006.
45. Pillsbury, 1998.
46. Mintz, 1997.
47. Lauden, 2011.
48. Peiss, 2007.
49. Thanks to Brett Gary for, as ever, his keen and insightful review of this chapter.

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Five Hundred Years of Fusion: Histories of Food in the Iberian World

Jeffrey M. Pilcher

In 1972 Alfred W. Crosby Jr. published *The Columbian Exchange* as the second volume in the Greenwood Press series Contributions in American Studies—after *The Rhetoric of American Politics* and before *The Presidency of Rutherford B. Hayes*. The incongruity of its placement reflected the novelty of its subject; environmental history had been recognized as a field of study only in the 1960s, and most early researchers focused narrowly on the U.S. conservation movement. Crosby sought to explain nothing less than the world historical encounter between Afro-Eurasia and the Americas as, in the words of his subtitle, *Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*. Although few people actually understood it at the time, his conceptualization of the exchange of plants, animals, and pathogens became a central theme in world history.[1] More than a generation later, students continue to be astonished by the thought of Irish cooking before the potato, Italian pasta and pizza without tomato sauce, or Indian and Thai cuisines unflavored by chili peppers. Crosby may never have considered himself a food historian; he published the chapters on disease as journal articles, while those on food appeared first in the book. Nevertheless, the historiography of food in the Iberian world is largely an elaboration of his original thesis. The fusion cuisines that resulted from Columbus's voyage in 1492 have shaped the populations, economies, and identities of Spanish and Portuguese speakers everywhere.

Historians interested in culinary exchanges, and cultural change more broadly, have borrowed insights from other disciplines, starting with Crosby, who adopted the perspectives of ecology and geography to ask larger questions of his sixteenth-century primary sources. Others have tightened the scale of inquiry to a microhistorical frame and used the tools of anthropology to glean from their documents the local meanings and material cultures that shaped the reception of new foods within particular societies.[2] Linguistic, botanical, and, increasingly, genetic analysis have also helped to trace the spread of foodstuffs around the globe.[3] In turn, scholars from other disciplines have been drawn to historical methods and narratives. Anthropologists Sidney Mintz and Arturo Warman used historical sources and chronologies to document the global travels of sugar and maize.[4] The historian's skill at writing for