Food in Time and Place

The American Historical Association
Companion to Food History

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Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss suggested in his 1966 essay “The Culinary Triangle” that relationships with food are one of the few universal truths of human activity. Civilizations rise and fall with the success of agricultural technologies; wars are waged and won on the stomachs of soldiers; modern citizens challenge their governments through their food choices. Just as gathering, preparing, and eating food frames our daily lives, it also profoundly shapes national, global, and cultural histories. Because it is such a necessary element for life, food access has a direct link to social and political power, making its history an ideal subject to use for examining broader themes and issues. Twentieth-century food history in particular occurs against the backdrop of dramatic technological, social, political, and economic transformation. Its relevance to larger historical themes is so pervasive that it is nearly impossible to disentangle food from any narrative of modern American life.

This chapter looks closely at these intersections in order to critically discuss the role that food scholarship now plays within the traditional academic discipline of history, and to affirm its place within more established frameworks for knowing the past.

“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 food history has primarily focused on consumption, it is also an umbrella term under which falls nearly every other aspect of life. While food remained a
names as their products were mass-produced, branded, shipped, and advertised on a national scale. New packaging technologies, such as cardboard with waxed paper seals and tin cans, could be inexpensively machine-made in factories with branded labels. These companies were thus able to keep their factory-produced contents edible long enough to make it thousands of miles from the warehouse to the dinner table. Commercial canning and bottling, well established by the early 1920s and rationed during World War II, reached a “golden age” in the 1950s as new materials, new methods, and new products proliferated, and a larger percentage of household budgets went to processed foods. Consumers’ use of canned foods continued to increase through the postwar era because of the convenience and stability of such products. In many rural areas still lacking refrigeration and electricity, they became integral to long-term food supply.

Between 1890 and 1950, grocery stores went from small corner shops to larger businesses often supplied by a central warehouse that offered branded food products to consumers. The cracker and pickle barrels that characterized American food shopping in turn-of-the-century general stores quickly gave way to markets stacked with individually packaged foods. Bulk purchasing in the 1880s meant that contamination and bacteria growth often compromised the quality and freshness of products, and seasonal availability controlled nonfixed prices. The advent of the industrial food system gave consumers the promise of purity, consistency, and a low cost that they could rely on. For example, the National Biscuit Company (later known as Nabisco) developed “Inter-seal” packaging for its first product, Uneeda Biscuits, in order to ensure that the crackers did not go soggy or stale while waiting to be purchased. The airtight cardboard box lined in wax paper ensured that every customer received the same high-quality product at the same price, nationwide.

Changes within the domestic space were just as profound as they were in the market, particularly once freezing and refrigeration technology found its way into homes during the 1920s and 1930s. Frozen foods, especially those manufactured by Clarence Birdseye, kept highly perishable goods fresher for longer with moisture-proof packaging. Meats, vegetables, and fruits could be distributed across the country year-round in reliably steady supply. Initially hesitant consumers were persuaded with the help of advertising campaigns that promoted frozen foods’ impressive new benefits. The increased number of freezers in homes allowed people to buy large quantities of fresh produce to freeze
for later consumption, or to store produce that they bought already frozen.

In a century of increasing international trade, where the import and export of food became a major industry, grocery store shelves put these political relationships on display. The twentieth century saw massive industrial change fueled by economic depression, two World Wars, and international aid policies that shaped American life through abundance and lack. By the advent of World War I, the eating habits of the American nation had become transformed into a modern industrial model. Dustbowl, breadlines, and Great Depression-era government legislation became major cultural touchstones for understanding this time of American hunger. As the United States forged and broke political bonds over the course of the twentieth-century, it allocated its resources towards war efforts, famine relief, and social services, thus affecting the purchasing power of its citizens.

MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY: FOOD PROCESSING’S GOLDEN AGE

The broad arc of the traditional American history narrative, grounded as it is in political history, frames our understanding of food as a vital natural, economic, and political resource. Food is central not only to domestic policy, but also to international relations. Nowhere is this more visible than throughout the Great Depression, the New Deal, and the food rationing of World War II. Following these moments of extreme oscillation between abundance and scarcity allows us to connect American history to global structures of economics and trade, national aggression, and domestic agricultural production and policy.

Much of the world’s population experienced decades of economic uncertainty during this period. Countries emerged from the Great War battered and despondent, if not devastated by an unprecedented scale of death and destruction. During the worldwide depression of the 1930s, it was not clear that even the United States would survive the economic devastation of the decade. During this time the U.S. government bulldozed tons of edible grain and slaughtered thousands of pigs in an attempt to stabilize food prices, which declined dramatically in the 1930s and threatened to bring the food system to collapse. At the same time, one-third of the nation did not have adequate food. Yet even as the Depression reached its bleakest moments in the mid-1930s, the notion of the United States as a nation of agricultural plenty (or one that held the promise of agricultural plenty) remained. New Deal legislation established programs, such as the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), that helped stabilize prices and productions, and financed such monolithic development projects as the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Columbia Basin Irrigation Project—engineering feats that changed the nature of agriculture in these regions.

After the worldwide depression of the 1930s and faced with the devastation of World War II, the federal government in coordination with private enterprise had focused industrial and agricultural production toward a single purpose: to win this “total war.” Enormous government expenditures stimulated economic production, which resulted in putting people back to work. The war accelerated and altered the production, manufacturing, and advertising of industrialized food, setting the stage for the remainder of the century. During the war, North American farmers produced food at record-breaking levels despite a smaller workforce, in part through liberal use of manufactured fertilizers and pesticides, including the new miracle insect-killer DDT. After the war, reliance on and increased use of such elements combined with increasingly sophisticated farm equipment and hybrid seeds led to even greater production (much of which was subsidized by long-held government parity agreements).

U.S. farmers, agriculture scientists, and politicians turned their attention to providing adequate food for the postwar world through famine relief and crop production. The American government purchased and sent surplus food abroad to help alleviate and temper the global famine conditions wrought by drought and wartime destruction. U.S. aid under the auspices of the Marshall Plan gave billions of dollars to rebuild European and Asian economies and infrastructures. To help answer the demands of the rapidly growing global population, Rockefeller Foundation scientists engineered new seeds designed to produce significantly more grain in countries all over the world. Known as the Green Revolution, these developments seemed to work miracles by vastly increasing the amount of food available to developing countries. Yet they also put a severe strain on local economies and endangered subsistence farmers, the environment, and indigenous cultures. By the late-twentieth century large corporate farming became the norm in the United States and elsewhere.

As in farm production, World War II provided the catalyst for the postwar boom in food processing. Military quartermaster departments pounded, dried, stretched, and shrunk foods in every imaginable way in order to reduce their bulk and weight, in order to ship them overseas.
efficiently and in large quantities. Frozen orange juice, instant coffee and cocoa, cake mixes, “brown and serve” rolls, dehydrated soups, instant potatoes, powdered eggs and milk, ready-trimmed and packaged meats, and even the ubiquitous TV dinner all either got their start or were perfected with wartime research and technology. After the war, the food industry quickly adopted this knowledge and technology to produce food items for domestic consumers. Advertisers and enthusiastic journalists deemed the new preservation techniques “a modern miracle in the kitchen.” The technology permeated the global food supply so pervasively that eventually “high-quality food” became synonymous with long shelf life and low spoilage.

The advertising campaign “Kitchens of Tomorrow” promoted by large companies like General Motors and RCA/Whirlpool in 1940s and 50s played upon the efficiencies and convenience that these new food technologies promised. The world watched in 1959 as American Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev enacted their “kitchen debate” at the American National Exhibition in Moscow, where a model kitchen and hired female actors exhibited microwave ovens as well as national ideals of freedom and modernity. Postwar housewives purchased and cooked these products—the instant mashed potatoes, the one-egg cake mixes—to feed their growing families, but with some ambivalence. Women embraced the new “package cuisine” as novel, labor-saving products that freed up a few minutes in their daily duties of feeding a family, but they also expressed a discontent over the implication of these products—and their attendant advertising—that women were somehow not up to the task of cooking from scratch.

These historical arguments directly reflected the postwar political climate, where Americans defined themselves in comparative terms against their wartime allies and enemies. The United States quickly dismantled food rationing at war’s end, largely at food manufacturers’ insistence, while rationing continued in most European countries for several more years as nations rebuilt war-ravaged farms and transportation systems. In this postwar era the United States hoped to have it all: distribute aid to needy countries, keep farmers contented, and maintain political dominance, all the while attempting to keep Cold War politics out of domestic agriculture, processing, and consumption. Postwar American relief, whether through the auspices of the Marshall plan or through private organizations, had tremendous effect symbolically as well as materially, helping to transmit elements of American culture across the globe. Aid from CARE (Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe) became so prominent—the organization shipped thousands of food packages to war-torn Europe—that the phrase “CARE package” became a generic term.

Supermarkets, hailed as the “shining food palaces of today,” symbolized American political, economic, and cultural dominance in the Cold War era. When foreign dignitaries, including the Queen of England and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, toured the United States, their itinerary invariably included a “typical” American supermarket. The press dutifully reported the awestruck visitors’ responses to the aisles and aisles of goods. “If Queen Elizabeth is a symbol of Britain,” surmised one columnist, “the supermarket is a symbol of the United States.”

To keep up with the overwhelming number of new food products in the postwar era, grocery stores radically transformed. While larger, self-serve supermarkets existed before the war, grocery chains became a permanent fixture in the postwar landscape, eventually swallowing the older-style grocery as well as contributing to the decline of specialty stores such as butchers, fresh fruit markets, and bakeries. Supermarkets, which housed all these under one roof, offered convenience and provided a larger selection of products. Their economies of scale produced the possibility of lower prices compared with the mom-and-pop stores, but there were trade-offs, too, most notably the loss of personal service and, arguably, of quality. Supermarkets expanded in size and number to accommodate the plethora of products brought to market with regularity. Specialized supermarket departments developed to include areas for baby food, gourmet items, meat (no longer cut to order by a butcher, but prewrapped), baked goods, produce, and dairy. Because such stores allowed customers more freedom to pick up and inspect items, brand names, eye-catching labels, and advertising became prominent strategies for attracting customers.

Cold War politics that pitted capitalism against communism made the overflowing abundance of American supermarkets difficult to ignore. Processed foods exhibited on grocery store shelves became a metaphor for the political, economic, and cultural supremacy of the United States. The U.S. Department of Commerce helped American manufacturers take their wares abroad to world expositions. The “Supermarket USA” display at the 1957 International Trade Fair in Communist Zagreb, Yugoslavia stirred international interest and criticism. Over six hundred American manufacturers supplied more than two hundred thousand dollars (1.7 million in 2014 dollars) of equipment and merchandise to
create a ten thousand square foot modern supermarket stocked to the gills with products. They designed the shelves, laden with all kinds of the latest products, to be a “dramatic and practical vehicle to demonstrate the America standard of living under ‘people’s capitalism.’”¹⁴ While “Supermarket USA” displayed some fresh produce and dairy products, highly processed and packaged items captured the spotlight: prepared baby foods, soup mixes, canned soups, cake mixes, instant coffee and tea, juice concentrates, prepared meat loaves, cut-up chickens, and a wide range of frozen food. Highly processed food and the individual choice afforded by self-service shopping, intentionally correlated “Americanness” with large quantities of food, a symbol of personal affluence as well as of an effective industrial supply model.

In addition to supermarkets, industrially produced “fast food” became another major export of American culture; fast food chain restaurants could accomplish what locally and individually owned operations had difficulty doing: providing food that is fast, cheap, and predictable. These restaurants, run according to formulas, benefited from economies of scale by purchasing large quantities of supplies and preparing the food in a centralized kitchen to be warmed and assembled at the chain. These cost-saving techniques also meant declining food quality. Nevertheless, the “fast food taste” appealed to most customers: soft white buns, flat hamburger patties, milkshakes made with increasingly less milk and more added preservatives and flavors, all resulted in a uniformity of taste. Restaurants like McDonald’s gained enormous followings and became beloved and permanent fixtures in mainstream culture. Concepts of convenience and speed became central tenets of the American diet. Although some countries, especially in Europe, protested these restaurants as an intrusion on national culture and cuisine, others, particularly in Asia, adopted and absorbed the basic concept and menu onto their gustatory landscape.¹⁵

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF FOOD IN THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY UNITED STATES

Few histories of food dot the historiographical landscape in the first half of the twentieth century. The most prominent example is Richard O. Cummings’s The American and His Food: A History of Food Habits in the United States, which appeared in 1941, at a time when America was still struggling to recover from the worldwide depression of the 1930s. Growing out of the author’s training in the history of science and techn-
ology, this history of food and nutrition in the United States up to 1940 tells a sweeping tale of colonial and early republic changes in the food supply as a result of scientific and technological developments and their subsequent effects on Americans’ nutrition. The American and His Food remained perhaps the primary academic history of food in the United States for several decades and served as a model for later books covering the same terrain.

In the mid-twentieth century historians began to take greater notice of the role of food in American historical scholarship. “Consensus history,” the dominant zeitgeist of the period, tended to focus on Americans’ common attributes and experiences.¹⁶ While progressive historians of an earlier generation had focused on class and cultural differences between citizens, consensus historians analyzed instead what Americans had in common. Though food is not a central component of consensus history, two prominent historians, Daniel Boorstin and David Potter, featured food in their historical analyses. Boorstin’s three-volume series, The Americans (1958, 1965, 1973), highlighted the importance of food as a fairly significant component of U.S. growth and development. Boorstin argued that the American landscape and American citizens’ material conditions of life helped produce their characteristic pragmatism, one not necessarily reproducible in other countries. David Potter’s 1954 study, People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character, echoed this material analysis of what used to be unself-consciously called the “American character,” by arguing that the United States and its citizens had 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 also one of the first studies to connect American abundance to increased mobility, decreased emphasis on community in favor of individualism, the rise of advertising, and the distinct nature of American democracy, including the illusion of classlessness.

Influenced by Cold War anxieties, consensus historians found a natural contrast between U.S. politics and culture and those of its rival the Soviet Union, and encouraged Americans to view themselves in terms of abundance and plenty. The “melting pot” metaphor, popular in the early twentieth century, found renewed strength when combined with an emboldened postwar notion of American exceptionalism. At the same time, advances in transportation and communications resulted in scholarship of this period frequently exhibiting elements of cosmopolitanism and an awareness of the place of the United States within a larger world.
In contrast to the consensus history of the postwar 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 opportunity, equality under the law, and social acceptance in society. Further, in the 1970s many 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 societal 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 access what had previously been the purview of mainly white middle- and upper-class males, including employment opportunities, higher education, and political office. The personal had become the political, and these 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 of the discipline to the lives of ordinary people.

The 1970s also witnessed a growing environmental movement, which fostered food history via the emerging topic of environmental history. World historian Alfred Crosby’s 1972 book *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*, focused on the environmental effects of sustained exchange between Eurasia and Africa (the “Old World”) and the Americas (the “New World”). Two central chapters in particular focus on the plants and animals that made their way across the Atlantic Ocean from one continent to the other, leading to dramatic changes in nutrition, culture, and cuisine. Crosby’s *The Columbian Exchange* set a new standard of method and argument that American food history writing has continued to emulate, refine, and develop.

In addition to giving increased attention to the environment, Americans during this period assumed cosmopolitan attitudes and aesthetics that left an indelible mark on the 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* (1961), and engaged in what food writer and historian Betty Fussell describes as “competitive home cooking.” Pride in domestic kitchen work flourished, and the boom in appreciation for and experimentation with French cuisine extended to cuisines of other countries. In the 1970s, Time-Life publishers launched a series of cookbooks, *Foods of the World*, that became immensely popular among a growing affluent, worldly, and educated middle class. Several volumes in the series also covered American regional foodways, which helped Americans gain an appreciation for the importance and value of the indigenous foods and cultures of their own country.

Culinary historians during this period began to cast a critical eye at the increasingly industrialized food of the United States, scrutinizing even what passed for “gourmet” cuisine. Books like *The Taste of America* (1977) celebrated the “real” regional cuisines and dishes of the country as a critique of “fancy” food. The hybrid genre of the historical cookbook also gained momentum as a category that appealed to a public interested in food and dining. Folklorists and the perspectives they brought with them also contributed significant work to the field. For example, Betty Fussell’s *I Hear America Cooking: The Cooks, Regions, and Recipes of American Regional Cuisine* (1986) explored American regional cuisine through interviews and cookbooks from distinct areas of the country. These books ultimately showed that an eager popular audience desired accessible, creative histories of food.

Against a backdrop of growing culinary interest, the mid- to late-1980s might be thought of as the first wave of substantial U.S. food history written by trained historians and social scientists. Food emerged as a focus of serious attention. This was the result of multiple factors: a maturing social history movement, an expansion in the breadth and depth of women’s history and feminist scholarship, and 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. The intellectual and social milieu of the mid- to late-1980s produced several strong food-focused histories in which authors creatively employed methodologies from various disciplines to craft rich cultural and social histories of food.

As a response to what many saw as the worst effects of the industrialization and globalization of the food supply, small but stubborn efforts to stem the tide emerged in the late twentieth century. Janet Poppendieck’s *Breadlines Knee-Deep in Wheat* (1986) and Warren James Belasco’s *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture took on the Food Industry* (1989) both criticized the consensus narratives of abundance that had dominated mid-century scholarship. Belasco, an American studies scholar and an active participant in the counterculture about
which he wrote, examined how food was central to the countercultural movement through the rise of communes, food co-ops, vegetarian restaurants, and cookbooks. Belasco is pessimistic in recounting how a corporate culture ultimately co-opted the new tastes, flavors, and dishes of the counterculture, including “ethnic” food, vegetarian items, yogurt, and herbal tea, in order to make a profit. Poppendieck similarly pushes back against previous popular understandings of American food history, chronicling the efforts of government assistance programs to restore America’s economic footing, with a particular focus on farm programs such as the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), which attempted to rescue a failing agricultural system that, paradoxically, produced too much food.

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 worked to write women back into history by telling the previously ignored or underappreciated stories of women in prominent positions—a sort of “great women in history” response to traditional history. Early feminist historians generally avoided domestic subjects like food and the kitchen, which many felt had previously limited women’s talents and opportunities. Yet, female daily involvement with food had remained central to women’s experience for so long that feminist scholars ultimately and eventually dug into its fertile ground. Notable works from this period include Laura Shapiro’s book Perfection Salad (1986), Joan Jacobs Brumberg’s Fasting Girls: The Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa (1988), and Rima Apple’s Mothers and Medicine: A Social History of Infant Feeding, 1890–1950 (1987). Mothers and Medicine in particular 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.

Finally, in addition to social movements and the new social history, the development of cultural studies encouraged the application of linguistic and literary theory to both historical and contemporary studies and became important to 1980s food scholarship. The idea of recipes as cultural texts gained particular 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, buildings, as well as food and recipes. Attitudes about the historical value of cookbooks gradually began to change, in part aided by literary scholar Susan

Leonardi’s 1989 article “Recipes for Reading: Summer Pasta, Lobster à la Risolome, 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 within substantial social context. This piece had a galvanizing effect on food studies scholarship by providing solid justification, as well as a template, for using recipes as texts.21 Although other articles employing recipes and cookbooks in this way had been previously published, Leonardi’s article was the first to garner enthusiastic and sustained reception.22

The dynamically changing historiography of food scholarship throughout the twentieth century—from ideologies of abundance, to countercultural movements, to second wave feminism—such not only how food systems have changed over the last hundred years, but also how our understanding of them has transformed just as dramatically. Thus, the ways in which food is produced, processed, distributed, controlled, consumed, and portrayed reveal not only hierarchies of power, but also the subtle, multileveled challenges to that power by groups and individuals in society. Food can be examined both at the individual level as well as the community, national, and international levels. Since food is power, the availability of food in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has directly influenced nations’ power and place in the world. The salience of recent debates concerning food safety, global environmentalism, the effect of food production on indigenous peoples and cultures worldwide, as well as the renewed interest in high-quality, minimally processed food, culinary tourism, and fine dining, combined with ever-rising rates of obesity and its adverse consequences, gives this history of food in the modern era rich potential.

TEACHING AND RESEARCH

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. Historians have received cultural history and the study of popular culture, for example, with varying degrees of enthusiasm. The history profession was thrown into something 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 begun to accept as legitimate topics previously considered too mundane, such as food (though to some the subject still smacks of amateurism).
However, for historians of food, texts are only one part of a larger cadre of information that can be used to understand histories such as those discussed above. Late twentieth-century scholarship has shown us how cookbooks are valuable resources for understanding historical recipes and preparation methods. However, “reading” cookbooks can be far richer. For example, the pages of a cookbook used in the kitchen will often have splatters and food stains on heavily used sections. Some cookbooks are pocket-sized, indicating that publishers intend them to be carried in an apron for easy access. Others with glossy illustrations are printed instead as objects for admiration and fantasy, containing recipes far too challenging to be accomplished in a domestic kitchen. Menus offer another excellent example of materially important documents. Though they feature minimal text, menus reflect dining experiences through the weight of their paper, typeface, and length. Such elements reflect the history of lived experience, and how readers engage with these texts both intellectually and socially; the difference between reading a menu on a board and on a small piece of paper can be significant.

The blurry line between “thing” and “text” has been, in the past, an uncomfortable acknowledgement for traditional historians, who worried that analyzing documents through physical knowledge might compromise the scholarly value of their work. It is important to read documents contextually, not just for their words, but also in order to study what might be considered quotidian. The domestic work of twentieth-century housewives rarely came with elaborate manuals. American women did, however, read widely distributed national magazines filled with illustrated advertisements that instructed on (supposedly) ideal femininity, morality, and national identity. The image of a nuclear family sitting around the dining table expresses, on the one hand, an advertiser’s method of selling consumers a product. It also suggests that consumers themselves responded to American ideals as they were portrayed in mass media. While these images may not illustrate modern realities, they show how those ideals were constructed and perpetuated through images and print media.

As food studies becomes an increasingly popular new discipline, libraries have responded by publicizing and increasing their collections of food-related materials. The substantial menu and culinary collection of the New York Public Library (NYPL) offers a web-searchable database; the Fales Library at New York University is rapidly expanding; and organizations such as the Southern Food and Beverage Museum in New Orleans have focused on establishing and enlarging a culinary library for researchers. Research collections that cater specifically to food studies scholars are now being seen as a new and exciting area of focus for special collections librarians and archivists. For example, the “What’s on the Menu?” project at NYPL, launched in 2011, enlists the help of online volunteers to transcribe each digitized menu in its entirety. Of the research possibilities that this project offers to scholars, perhaps the most important is the ability to search for and aggregate information on specific dishes, ingredients, and preparation methods. While metadata for the menus has been available to researchers since the collection’s beginnings, this will be the first time that the contents of the documents are searchable, allowing unprecedented electronic access.

STATE OF THE FIELD AND IDEAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Few would argue with the premise that food has taken on new importance in recent decades, in large part as a reaction to the industrialization of the food supply. In many areas of the world, the last few decades have witnessed an emerging food “revolution” that has attempted to counter (or at least circumvent) the worst aspects of the industrialization of food. Yet this recent interest in food has historical roots that reach back centuries. In his 2006 book Meals to Come, Warren Belasco provides an intellectual history of world hunger and of the debate over providing sufficient food for all. Belasco examines in nuanced detail how each generation of Western philosophers, economists, politicians, and fiction writers has framed and evaluated that dilemma. In one camp are the pessimists, who argue that there will never be enough food to feed us all. Another group are the optimists—Belasco terms them the “cornucopians”—who see science and human ingenuity as sufficient to meet each generation’s challenges and shortcomings. Finally, the “egalitarians” (William Godwin, Frances Moore Lappé) are those who see the problem as less about quantity than about equal distribution between the haves and have-nots. These basic theoretical positions have persisted across centuries. At the same time, it is important to note the culturally bound nature of these debates, especially writers’ definitions of “enough food.” Invariably these discussions turn to meat, and it is startling to see successive generations of European and American thinkers worrying about having enough meat, many fretting that the West will be reduced to “cooie” (grain-based) diets.23

Those involved in the recent food movement have worked to demonstrate the connection between good food and sustainable agricultural
practices and to create better-tasting, higher-quality food. Since the late 1990s, scholarly and political attention to food matters has deepened as the academic field of food studies has emerged, and as popular books by Eric Schlosser (Fast Food Nation), Marion Nestle (Food Politics and Safe Food), and Michael Pollan (The Omnivore’s Dilemma), as well as films such as Supersize Me, King Corn, and Food, Inc., exposed to an interested public the questionable practices of the food industry and the government’s willingness to accommodate food-industry demands. The list of such books is long, and the titles themselves revealing: Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the Food System (Raj Patel); Food, Inc.; Mendel to Monsanto: The Promises and Perils of the Biotech Harvest (Peter Pringle); The End of Food (Paul Roberts); Manger: Français, européens et américains face à l’alimentation (Claude Fischler with Estelle Masson); Slow Money: Investing as if Food, Farms, and Fertility Mattered (Woody Tasch); The End of Overeating: Taking Control of the Insatiable American Appetite (David Kessler); Food Matters: A Guide to Conscious Eating (Mark Bittman); and In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto and Food Rules: An Eater’s Manual (Michael Pollan). Taken together they manifest an awareness of deep problems in the global food supply, ranging from health and nutrition, to economics and environment, to corporate control of food production, advertising, and consumption, to the peril of people and the planet. What emerges is the realization that seemingly disparate and unrelated topics (obesity, environment, flavor, family meals, hunger) are indeed interconnected. Taken together, a cluster of themes emerges. With various emphases, all address ethical, health, environmental, and aesthetic issues as well as anxieties about cultural and social reproduction that have been central to discussions about food production and consumption in the last decade.

What cultural and material currents underlie this interest in and anxiety about food? First among them is the sheer amount of food that is available, at least in the global North, with all its ramifications, positive and negative. The United States as well as other nations has become particularly adept at producing huge amounts of food, and we eat a lot more of it than we used to. The industrialization of agriculture, combined with government policies and politics encouraging the mass production of food, is a double-edged sword. While it has facilitated better overall nutrition and health, it has also allowed excess and, ironically, poor health. While some critics wonder whether the uproar over rising rates of obesity is fueled less by health concerns and more by superficial cosmetic responses and a diet and food industry that benefits from the current landscape of food consumption, there are important health concerns that cannot be dismissed, such as the startling rise in diabetes, especially among children. Combine this sheer abundance with the “omnivore’s dilemma”—the anxiety created by the multitude of food options—and it is easy to understand the well-fed person’s predicament in the twenty-first century.

There are also fears that industrial food culture has damaged our social fabric as well as the environment. The rise of fast food together with other social and cultural phenomena (more single-parent and two-income families, cars built with cup holders and food trays) have led to changes in domestic food practices, which have in turn been viewed as affecting family life and even civil society. While it is possible to have a meaningful meal prepared from a microwave or around a table of fast food, it is true that by its nature quickly produced and quickly eaten food changes the qualitative experience of a meal. It makes sense then that food issues are a prominent part of the public discourse in the twenty-first century. For many, careful consideration of the food one eats and serves one’s family and friends helps fill a spiritual void. Only a return to more humane, more harmonious methods of growing, cooking, and eating, the thinking goes, will help restore a spiritual connection with the land, with our food, and with each other.

This is not a new idea, of course. Thinkers from Thomas Jefferson to Wendell Berry have been preaching these notions for centuries, but as we have entered the twenty-first century, they have taken a qualitatively different turn. As Jackson Lears has demonstrated about mass production in general, in the nineteenth century many people felt alienated by modernism and an industrialization that severed the connection between producer and consumer; that alienation is still palpable in our relationship to mass-produced, industrial food.24 Seeking local, seasonal food today can be viewed as a version of the early twentieth-century critique of mass society, in which a return to artisanal food functions as a bulwark against the ease and reproducibility of mass-produced, industrial goods. For many people preparing meals from scratch for one’s family using ingredients bought at a local farmer’s market signifies self-reliance, a sense of simplicity, and a voluntary disconnect from the fast pace of our postindustrial, digital era. It can also result in less wastefulness. Many producers and sellers of this alternative vision of food capitalize on and cater to these kinds of desires. Indeed, marketers have learned that while the new food culture may not appeal to all (in fact, it may not appeal to the majority), it does appeal to a sizable, influential minority.
Supermarkets have become willing to stock their produce sections with organic fruits and vegetables, which, even if they do not sell readily, are attractive, powerful "loss leaders" that may draw customers into stores and bring them back again. Nonindustrial food (and industrial organic food, as Michael Pollan terms it) is simply more accessible in most parts of the industrialized world, and that availability is shaping consumption and food habits, at least in certain parts of the globe.25

Thus, recent discourse about food represents a genuine attempt to integrate complex issues linking aesthetics and ethics with health, the environment, family life, social issues, and notions of taste—issues the twentieth-century public might not have recognized as having much in common. Further, many today are more cognizant of the origins of their food. For most of the twentieth century, as the connections weakened between producer and consumer, many had little reason to think about and understand the origins of their food: how it was grown or raised, how it was processed, and how it reached the market or the restaurant.

If the contemporary conversation about food falls short in any area, it is in addressing the difficult but crucial issue of getting all this healthy, sustainable (more expensive, less widely distributed) food to people of little means. While many applaud the agenda of Slow Food, the work of Alice Waters, or the writings of Carlo Petrini and Michael Pollan, detractors on both the left and the right criticize this movement as elitist and unrealistic. Of course, many of the writers and activists envisioning this "grand theory of food" see little difference between science and poetry, between applying rational thought or romantic sentiment to food problems and issues. For them, all knowledge, all emotion leads to the same point: a refashioned food system incorporating sustainable practices, cultural sensitivity, good nutrition, and taste. Such a system, according to this view, is in the long run the most practical and economically viable.

These debates have produced considerable interest in food studies as an academic field. Recent work on U.S. history, like recent work on non-Western countries and populations, has focused on social and cultural history, and the histories of material culture, popular culture, ethnicity, and race. A long and varied list of food histories emanated from all of these subfields and more: social/labor history, science and technology, agricultural history, women's/gender history, race and ethnicity, and cultural history and history of consumption in its broadest sense.26 Several university presses, including Illinois, California, and Columbia, began their own food series. In addition to the publication of several food encyclopedias and multivolume food histories numerous food histories were written with a general audience in mind, a further indication that food scholarship is entering the realm of mainstream history, both popular and scholarly.27

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 one that is 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 the 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. For these very reasons it remains to be seen whether traditional history departments in the United States will ultimately embrace food history. In any case, given current debates concerning food safety, obesity and its health consequences, global environmentalism, the effect of food production on indigenous peoples and cultures worldwide, and with Americans' renewed interest in high-quality, minimally processed food, it is clear that food history as a focus of both scholarly and popular inquiry is a topic here to stay.

NOTES

4. Daniel Delis Hill, Advertising to the American Woman, 1900–1999 (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2002).


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