History on the Plate: The Current State of Food History

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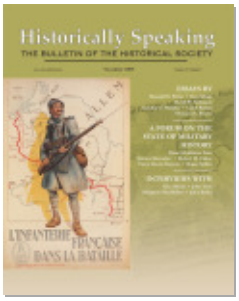

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Assessing Food History

FOOD HISTORY IS GAINING CONSIDERABLE INTEREST IN the academy and beyond. We asked Ken Albala, a leading food historian at the University of the Pacific, to provide our readers with an assessment of the field. Senior editor Donald A. Yerxa then met up with Albala in August 2009 at a Cambridge, Massachusetts, restaurant to discuss food history and his approach to it.

Albala is author of nine books on food history including Eating Right in the Renaissance *(University of California Press, 2002);* Food in Early Modern Europe *(Greenwood Press, 2003);* Cooking in Europe, 1250-1650 *(Greenwood Press, 2005);* The Banquet: Dining in the Great Courts of Late Renaissance Europe *(University of Illinois Press, 2007);* Beans: A History *(Berg Publishers, 2007) (winner of the 2008 International Society of Culinary Professionals Jane Grigson Award and the Cordon D'Or award for Food History/Literature);* Pancake *(Reaktion Press, 2008); and the forthcoming* World Cuisines. *He is also co-authoring a cookbook for Penguin / Perigee provisionally entitled* The Antiquated Kitchen *and editing a four-volume* Food Cultures of the World Encyclopedia. *He has served as book reviews editor of* Food Culture and Society *for the past six years and has recently become co-editor of the journal.*

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The sudden and dramatic interest in food scholarship in the past two decades might lead one to believe that food history is a new and emergent field. The recent proliferation of monographs, studies of individual ingredients, and comprehensive encyclopedias is impossible to deny. But the roots of food history as a branch of the discipline are nearly as old as history writing itself. Athenaeus of Naucratis in the 2nd century A.D. set out to record every detail of ancient food habits in his *Deipnosophistae* and effectively founded a distinct genre in the Western tradition. The *Food Canons* (*Shih ching*) written in T'ang Dynasty China by Meng Shen, Athenaeus's counterpart in the East, chronicle every food consumed at court, and when and how it arrived. One might even posit that the Hebrew Bible is essentially a narrative of successive epochs defining the relationship of the Jews to God based on their diet and is thus a form of food history, as is much of the mythology concerned with food around the globe. So, too, are the many chronicles of the Middle Ages, which record great feasts as a way of legitimizing royal power.

The modern academic study of past foodways, however, emerged decisively in the 16th century with several monographs discussing classical dining habits: Janus Cornarius's *De conviviis veterum Graecorum* (1548), J. Guglielmus Stuckius's *Antiquitatum Convivialium* (1583), Petrus Ciacconius's *De Triclinio* (1588), Erycius Puteanus's *Reliquae convivii prisci* (1598), and Cesar Bulengerus's *De conviviis libri quator* (1627), just to name a few. These were all text-based studies using fairly sophisticated analysis, though they also began to incorporate data from material remains in ways that foreshadow the future field of archaeology. No less important was the appearance of the general food encyclopedia in the Renaissance with texts like Jean Bruyerin-Champier's *De re cibaria* (1560), which incorporates a great deal of historical material and resembles current encyclopedias to a surprising extent.

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In succeeding generations, writers began to turn their attention to more recent food habits, especially their own native traditions. An early example of this is Richard Warner's *Antiquitates Culinariae* (1791), which reprints medieval English cookbooks such as the *Forme of Cury*. These works were often part of the process of nation-building, and went hand in hand with an interest in folklore, the preservation of historic buildings, native music, and folk dress.

The field at this point also split into two distinct approaches that still exist: *food history*, which covers the social, economic, intellectual, and cultural parameters of consumption, and *culinary history*, which focuses on ingredients, cooking methods, recipes, and the history of the cookbook, often accompanied by the reconstruction of historic cooking in situ. This form of culinary history still flourishes at historic sites such as Plimouth Plantation, Colonial Williamsburg, and Hampton Court, where people in historic dress work before a hearth, cooking old recipes. Academics by and large distanced themselved from this hands-on approach since the physical act of cooking was considered more appropriate for antiquarians than professional historians. This bifurcation has had long-lasting effects, namely that food history often neglects the kitchen, while culinary history often ignores the rigorous methods of textual analysis used by food historians.

It has become commonplace to trace the current scholarly interest in food history to the French *Annales* school of the mid-20th century. In so far as food history is a part of social history and material life, economic history and world trade, the history of private life and the caloric reconstruction of human diets, then there is no doubt that the *Annales* school had a major impact on the current interest in alimentation. Fernand Braudel's work was especially influential, and *Annales* regularly featured essays on food history (an edited collection of these, *Food and Drink in History*, appeared in 1979).

In addition to the *Annales* influence, many people in the West became extremely interested in cooking during the latter part of the 20th century. This interest manifested itself in more and more magazines and television programs about food and cooking. But there was—and is—a scholarly component as well. The Oxford Symposium for Food and Cookery, founded by Alan Davidson and Theodore Zeldin, first met in 1981. In the late 1970s and early 1980s works such as Bridget Ann Henisch's *Fast and Feast*, Barbara Ketchum Wheaton's *Savoring the Past*, and Stephen Mennell's *All Manners of Food* appeared, all of which focus on the history of cookbooks and cooking, as well as the social and intellectual milieu of food con-

sumption. Covering American food history were Harvey Levenstein's groundbreaking *Revolution at Table* and *Paradox of Plenty* as well as Warren Belasco's *Appetite for Change*, which focus on the way big business co-opted the health food industry, thus bringing contemporary concerns to bear on history. In Italy the works of Piero Camporesi added food to the roster of topics in the history of ideas. And Alfred Crosby's *Columbian Exchange* brought forth a subfield of world history that concentrates on the history of food exchanges.

Equally important as these works was the turn taken by anthropologists toward history. Anthropology had established a long pedigree of food-centered scholars including Norbert Elias, Claude Levi-Strauss, and Mary Douglas. The publication of Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power*, which uses historical methodology to explain the rise of sugar in the global economy and the modern diet, showed anthropologists just how potent the combination of food and history could be.

Illustration from Alexis Soyer, *Pantropheon, or, History of Food, and Its Preparation, from the Earliest Ages of the World* (London, 1853).

Mintz's book was not the first to focus on a single ingredient. Redcliffe Salaman's book on the potato, first published in 1949, remains a classic in the field. Yet the popularity of using a single ingredient to illustrate larger historical processes came to full fruition in books on cod and salt by Mark Kurlansky, corn by Betty Fussell, chocolate by Sophie Coe, and tomatoes, peanuts, and popcorn by Andrew F. Smith. The genre now encompasses nearly every food imaginable from bananas and beans to citrus to olives and pasta, not to mention a proliferation of books about spices.

In the early 1990s food history truly blossomed. The journal *Food and Foodways* was founded in the mid-1980s and was soon followed by the journal now known as *Food, Culture, and Society*, published for the Association for the Study of Food and Society, which has held annual meetings since 1987. Food panels increasingly appeared at meetings of other historical organizations such as the American Historical Association. Food Studies programs with historical curricula were founded at New York University, Boston University, and the University of Adelaide. In Europe academic programs appeared at Tours and the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. In Italy there is the University of Gastronomic Sciences, which is connected to the Slow Food Movement. New programs continue to sprout up like mushrooms. These programs have turned out a number of young scholars poised to have a major impact on the future of food history.

Publishers have understood that food is a profitable genre. There are food series at the University of California Press, Columbia University Press, the University of Illinois Press, and several others. Publishers like Routledge and Oxford University Press have increased the food offerings in their catalogues. Specialty presses like Prospect Books, Southover, and Arnaldo Forni reprint historical cookbooks in facsimile and in new editions. Journals such as *Gastronomica* have also bridged the gap between popular and academic food writing. The International Association of Culinary Professionals formed a food history committee, which regularly offers history sessions at its annual conferences and several food history-focused conferences. Local food history organizations also flourish. These groups are mostly made up of amateur enthusiasts who focus on culinary history rather than food history. Nonetheless, their members are often superb food writers and their work sometimes more accessible than that produced by scholars.

In the past two decades research libraries have begun to amass serious collections for food historians. The Clements Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan, the Schlesinger Library in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which holds the papers of Julia Child and other luminaries, the New York Public Library, and the Los Angeles Public Library have all organized and made accessible primary food documents for the first time. The Newberry, Huntington, and Morgan libraries are also viable venues for food research. And hidden treasures have been discovered in such repositories as the New York Academy of Medicine, which holds one of only two manuscript copies of the ancient cookbook attributed to Apicius.

Like so many new academic fields, the development of food history has been facilitated by the use of electronic media. Listservs, such as that sponsored by the Association for the Study of Food and Society, connect scholars around the world. Digitized texts and facsimiles of primary food documents appear on sites such as the Feeding America project from Michigan State, the Fons Grewe site in Barcelona, the Biblioteque Nationale's Gallica site, Thomas Gloning's site in Germany, and numerous other smaller venues, many of which are supported by historical reenactors. Other collections such as Early English Books Online make historic cookbooks available to subscribing institutions. Perhaps no other electronic tool has become more important recently than Google Books, where practically every day new historic cookbooks and food-related texts appear for free.

The publication of several mammoth food encyclopedias highlights the importance of food history as a legitimate academic topic. Alan Davidson's *Oxford Companion to Food*, decades in preparation, provides a serious reference work for a popular audience. *The Cambridge World History of Food*, edited by Kenneth Kiple and Kriemhild Ornelas, is more research-oriented, but still accessible. There are also Scribner's three-volume *Encyclopedia of Food and Culture* and the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America*. If anything signals the maturation of a field it is a significant body of research capable of forming such a number of excellent reference works as well as the contributors to fill them.

How many food historians are currently working full time in academic history departments? The number is perhaps a few dozen at most, though every day new names appear in print with articles and books on food history. Nonetheless, at least half of the productive food historians writing today are food writers or journalists. Moreover, the best way for one to become a professional food historian remains to go into a traditional graduate program in history and then conduct research on food. This is the practical reality of the job market, where one is usually expected to teach a range of courses with a specific geographic and temporal focus. Thus most academic food historians are also historians of traditional fields. Is this a situa-

tion to be lamented? I think it should be celebrated. There are few other subdisciplines so equally divided within and without academia, and this ironically provides great strength, each contingent balancing the deficiencies of the others. It is becoming increasingly difficult both to write boring food history, and to do it with poor scholarship. For the discipline this bodes very well, as does the practical necessity of venturing outside of history for methodology. Food historians today regularly make use of anthropology and sociology, art history, literary studies, economics, philosophy, etc. The interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary nature of all food scholarship suggests that eventually there will be a recognizable discipline known as food studies, of which food history will be an indispensable part.

An Interview with Ken Albala

Conducted by Donald A. Yerxa

Donald A. Yerxa: You note that there are two distinct approaches to the study of past foodways: food history and culinary history. In which camp are you?

Ken Albala: Unusually, I put myself right in the middle with a foot firmly planted on both sides.

Yerxa: Why is that unusual?

Albala: Academic food historians usually don't cook things, and the people who are very interested in cooking don't have the time, skills, or the desire to do the kinds of research that academics do. Also, they are not interested in the same kinds of questions. Culinary historians are interested first and foremost in the actual recipes and what the food tastes like. And that's something that academic historians don't have any interest in. They are interested in issues of gender, class, or politics. Academic food historians look at cookbooks and other sources for issues of "bigger" historical importance.

Dining cars on an American train, 1905. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZ62-29464].

I should say, however, that things are beginning to change. Historians are recognizing that what people ate and what they thought about what they ate should be treated like other aesthetic endeavors such as art or music. And if you want to know what people ate in the past, you need to cook from old recipes.

Let me give you an example from a workshop I conducted in Vermont this summer. There is an English recipe from the *Good Huswives Treasurie* (1588) for smearing a rabbit. The rabbit is cooked in a vessel called a pipkin, a ceramic vessel with three legs that sits on hot coals and is sealed with dough so that none of the moisture escapes. If you analyze this recipe, it makes no sense. There's very little liquid in it. A whole rabbit is stuffed into a small vessel with onions, raisins, a little drop of verjus, and spices. It doesn't seem possible that the rabbit would fit in a pipkin, and even if it did, you would think it would burn. In fact, if you were to cook this on a stovetop, it would burn. But I have learned that you have to follow the directions exactly and make no substitutions. This particular recipe required me to make a pipkin myself. (I have a pottery studio in my basement.) I didn't realize at first that a pipkin is rounded on the bottom, and for good reason: it enables the heat to be distributed around the circumference of the pot and prevents cracking at the base. This explains why medieval cooking vessels often had rounded bottoms. After a few experiments, it came out magnificently. And this smeared rabbit confirmed my impression that you really can't know what's going on with a recipe unless you cook it as authentically as you possibly can. Keep in mind that species of animals are different now; vegetables are different. And it is impossible to know in every instance what people in the past were doing with their food. So you need to put in a lot of thought and be willing to experiment.

To get back to your original question, I'm trying to do both food and culinary history. I engage in the requisite historical research, but also do the cooking and eating. I have been teaching a course at Boston University this summer that combines these pursuits. A third of the class is devoted to a traditional history lecture; another third is devoted to analyzing historic recipes from an intellectual point of view; and in the final third we actually cook.

Yerxa: There is so much interest in experiencing the past and exploring the extent to which that is even possible. It strikes me that the culinary approach to past foodways you are talking about is part of the same overall impulse that drives people to play music on period instruments or reenact Civil War battles.

Albala: Indeed. It has always seemed strange to me that in, say, music it is perfectly legitimate for the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields to use period instruments and attempt to play music as it was in the past. But no one ever seems to talk about food history aesthetically. There is no special