

## The Oxford Handbook of Food History

**Review Number:** 1472

**Publish date:** Thursday, 29 August, 2013

**Editor:** Jeffrey Pilcher

**ISBN:** 9780199729937

**Date of Publication:** 2012

**Price:** £95.00

**Pages:** 508pp.

**Publisher:** Oxford University Press

**Publisher url:** <http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780199729937.do>

**Place of Publication:** Oxford

**Reviewer:** Anthony Stanonis

The field of food studies has gained significant traction over the previous two decades. Across a range of disciplines, from religious studies to anthropology to history, among others, a growing body of books, articles, and conference papers has explored the history of particular foods. This scholarship has also begun analyzing foodways, meaning how a society understands the practice of eating and imbues meals with cultural meanings. Though still an emergent area of study, enough scholarship about food and foodways has been published that an overview of the field is overdue. Thankfully, *The Oxford Handbook of Food History*, edited by Jeffrey Pilcher, provides such a resource. Pilcher cooks up a satisfying sampler that captures the richness of food studies from a wide range of perspectives.

Pilcher's carefully edited volume provides a thorough overview of the current state of food studies. The collection is a valuable touchstone for scholarship from various disciplines. Pilcher divides the 27 essays into five parts; these units include food histories, food studies, means of production, the circulation of food, and communities of consumption.

The handbook captures the five main themes of research in food studies via essays arranged 'along thematic and comparative lines in the hopes that national concerns will not become blinders to larger historical processes' (p. xix). Food scholars have been notable in emphasizing the blending of ingredients and cooking techniques across borders that too often limit academic research. Admittedly, much of the scholarship mirrors the disproportional number of works conducted on foodways in the United States. However, this volume succinctly demonstrates food scholars' success in not only expanding the perspectives of numerous disciplines but also breathing fresh air into what seemed exhausted topics, often by emphasizing the porousness of national borders. The field of food studies demonstrates the contribution of food to hegemonic rule, the change of culinary traditions over time, the connections between food and identity, the rise of the modern industrial food system, and evolving beliefs in dietary health.

The handbook roots food studies in scholarship dating to the inter-war period. Historians within the Annales School, namely Lucien Febvre, Marc Bloch, and Fernand Braudel, first noted the importance of food to understanding past societies. The School's scholars focused on food typically as part of works concerned with identifying broader cultural patterns of French society. Their attention to everyday life, the

preoccupation with commodities among state leaders, and the values central to civilization guided the Annales historians. Food's importance within this scholarship granted a 'sense of legitimacy' to food studies (p. 12).

The chapters contained within this volume reveal the seminal nature of several more recent studies. Together, the essays provide a fascinating insight into how particular books transcend disciplines and, in this case, give impetus to academic work on food. In 1972, historian Alfred Crosby published *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*.<sup>(1)</sup> His study showed the devastating impact of disease on the native populations of the Americas. He also elaborated upon the dramatic transfer of crops and animals from the Americas to Europe, Africa, and Asia – basically anywhere imperialist trade carried the goods – and vice versa. For instance, New World tomatoes and potatoes became staples of Italian and Irish diets, respectively, while sheep introduced to Mexico changed local diets and negatively altered the landscape through overgrazing. Anthropologist Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, published in 1985<sup>(2)</sup>, traces the transformative impact of sugar production from the 1600s through the 1800s. Sugar began as a product enjoyed by the rich. However, the development of Caribbean sugar plantations worked by slaves lowered the price of the commodity to the point that, by the 19th century, sugar had become a staple of working-class diets. For the working class, sugar symbolized increasing economic freedom and status even as the commodity lost favor among the wealthy. Mintz demonstrated how the study of a single commodity can expose not only how diets changed but also how labor patterns and class divisions evolved across the Atlantic world. Caroline Walker Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, published in 1988<sup>(3)</sup>, argued that women in the Middle Ages used food and its relationship to religious devotion to assert themselves within their families and society. Each of these works demonstrates the importance of food as both a reflection and contributor to historical change, influencing cultural beliefs, social structure, and individual relationships.

The section on food histories offers an impressive recounting of foodways in historical research. The unit largely consists of historical perspectives on commodities and eating practices. Besides Sydney Watts' summary of the Annales School's treatment of foodways, the section contains Enrique Ochoa's look into political histories, Jeffrey Pilcher's analysis of cultural histories, Tracey Deutsch's examination of labor histories, and Rayna Green's critique of public histories. These fine essays reveal clearly how food production, famine, and supply are linked to distribution networks, control of land, and income distribution – especially as the development of empires and consumerism in the 17th century separated the culinary arts from its roots in Medieval medicine.

The section on food studies is similarly enlightening. Carole Counihan explores the role of food in shaping gender conventions. Men, for instance, consume more meat not only for the greater protein intake, but also because consumption of animals is considered more manly than consumption of vegetables. In a particularly insightful essay, anthropologists R. Kenji Tierney and Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney trace their discipline's long interest in eating customs and beliefs about food. Whether rice in Japan, corn in the Americas, or wheat in Europe, diet – particularly staples – define civilizations, providing sustenance and shaping worldviews such as religion. The Christian celebration of wine and wheat as the blood and flesh of Christ via the Eucharist signifies the importance of foods within cultural beliefs. Sierra Clark Burnett and Krishnendu Ray explore the place of food within sociology, a 'policy-focused' discipline largely concerned with the entrenched inequalities in food production and consumption (p. 138). Bertie Mandelbatt examines how geographers treat food by exposing the importance of locality to eating customs and ingredients. As he rightly notes, even those without power, such as slaves and colonial subjects were 'consumers within metropolitan political economies', and as 'knowledge transmitters critical to the functioning of empire' vital to the creation of culinary cultures around the world (p. 158). The study of foodways exposes how the seemingly powerless possessed significant influence around the globe. Charlotte Biltekoff critiques critical nutrition studies with an eye to the 'cultural politics of dietary health' (p. 173). The astute essay examines the three paradigms of nutritional science: the 'New Nutrition' fixated with calories from the 1880s to 1910s (p. 175), the 'Newer Nutrition' concerned with recently-discovered vitamins from the 1910s to 1940s (p. 176), and the 'chronic disease' era in which dieticians and doctors have fretted about rising obesity rates since the 1940s (p. 177).

Rightly, she argues that the 'science of nutrition is absolutely inseparable from its moral content' (p. 181). By surveying dozens of syllabi and assignments, Jonathan Deutsch and Jeffrey Miller address the issues arising from university courses devoted to food. Their essay is a pedagogical tour de force that makes for essential reading for teachers interested in the successes and pitfalls of incorporating food into classes. Oddly, the volume lacks an essay on representations of food within literary works. Literary scholars, like their colleagues in other disciplines, have shown an increased curiosity about the uses of food in interpreting novels, poetry, and other creative works.

The essays on the means of production show the dramatic changes in the ways humans have cultivated, processed, and marketed sustenance. Sterling Evans traces the relationship of agricultural production to environmental history. Starting at the dawn of humankind, the essay outlines how the 'increasing substitution of more easily digestible animal proteins in place of plant foods protected by tough cellulose allowed the evolution of smaller digestive tracts and shifting of energy' to the brain (p. 211). Evans then traces the intensification of agriculture under colonialism as the 'solar-based ecology of agrarian empires' reached its limits by 1492 (p. 218). In recent centuries, industrial firms have significantly bolstered food production through genetic manipulation and greater use of chemicals. The consequences are evident in current climate change. Ken Albala details the strengths and weaknesses of cookbooks as historical documents. Cooking guidebooks can provide valuable biographical and cultural insights. Even noticing stains or marginalia can reveal the popularity of recipes and the mindset of former readers. Jayeeta Sharma explores the links between food and empire. From the emergence of canning in France in 1809 to the devastation of the bison herds in North America to both control Native Americans and facilitate the rise of cattle ranchers, Sharma insightfully divulges the links between industrial food production and imperial designs. The rise of industrial food production and processing receives attention from Gabriella M. Petrick. Steve Penfold investigates the emergence of the fast food industry and the incorporation of such foods within cultures around the globe. A Pizza Hut celebrated as an American institution when first opened can, within a generation, become thought of as local fare, leading Korean and other tourists to the United States surprised to see Pizza Huts in America. Though other nations have copied American-style fast food, the industry remains heavily dominated by companies based in the United States with, surprisingly, no foreign chains penetrating the American market.

The circulation of food within human society receives thorough discussion. Donna R. Gabaccia analyzes the linkage of food, mobility, and world history. She notes how a global perspective points 'to trade, to human migrations, and to media as the mechanisms by which particular foods, food practices, food technologies, and food knowledge travel across space, time, and cultural boundaries' (p. 306). Most significantly, she emphasizes that sedentism – the focus on settled civilizations – gives a false view of human history, which involves frequent motion. Paul Freedman scrutinizes the surprisingly wide-ranging medieval spice trade. Rebecca Earle recounts the global impact of the Columbian Exchange. Elias Mandala describes the ties connecting food, time, and history. André Magnan scrutinizes the two food regimes – the grain and meat trade controlled by the United Kingdom from the 1870s through 1910s as well as the politically-constructed international trade in industrialized agrofood shaped by the United States from 1945 to 1973 – that have shaped global food production since the late 19th century. Culinary tourism, in which vacationers pursue experiences with specific foods like wine or culinary cultures, receives attention from Lucy Long. Long highlights the irony that globalization has invigorated local cuisines by both encouraging attention to local products and cooking techniques, while also infusing new ideas into traditional culinary practices.

The final section, which deals with communities of consumption, reveals the centrality of food to identity. Corrie Norman traces the neglected role of food in religious belief and practices around the world. Whereas the study of sexuality has established itself as a vibrant field since the 1970s, food – so often equally regulated by religions – remains underdeveloped. Yong Chen discusses food, race, and ethnicity. Alison Smith reviews the topic of national cuisines. Rachel A. Ankeny analyzes food and ethical consumption. Her look at a wide range of movements from fair trade to veganism to slow food, among others, is a concise yet thorough review of recent concerns about sustainable food consumption. Her work suggests how the moral tone of these movements has come to bear strong religious overtones. Warren Belasco concludes the volume

with a discussion of food and social movements.

Overall, this is a vital and timely gathering of scholarship. The topics contained within this collection occasionally overlap from essay to essay, but the differing perspectives offered by each contributor add fresh insight on the material covered. The general public will find this collection a stimulating introduction to the study of food and foodways. Scholars who work on food-related topics will find these essays a thoughtful assessment of the field from multiple perspectives. The range and depth of the essays within this volume reveal the maturity of food studies as a field as well as the exciting avenues available for further analysis.

## Notes

1. Alfred Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (1972). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (London, 1985). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, CA, 1988). [Back to \(3\)](#)

The editor would like to thank the reviewer for such a thoughtful and generous review.

---

**Source URL:** <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1472>

## Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/49017>