MOVEABLE FEASTS
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The History, Science, and Lore of Food

Gregory McNamee
for Marianne, my favorite chef
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INTRODUCTION

Some years ago, I traveled through China with some doctor friends, studying Tai Chi, walking through countryside and city, and enjoying the endless sights. One of the least scenic of them was the passenger waiting room at the airport in the ancient capital of Xian, a building that seemed to have been built by beginning apprentices sometime in the early years of the T’ang dynasty, encrusted with ancient garbage and coated in generations of nicotine. We were stuck there, fogged in, awaiting a flight that had not yet left its originating airport of Hangzhou, three hours away, and it did not help our collective mood that most of us had the flu. That fact did not stop one of the doctors from brightly saying, “Well, I know a way to pass the time. Let’s talk about the best meals we’ve ever had.”

At the moment, I was struggling with the effects of recent meals that I had had, featuring water buffalo stomachs, various other innards, and the inevitable french-fried potatoes that, at least in those days, Chinese chefs seemed to think foreigners required in order to live. Still, I thought hard, and then decided that the single best meal I had ever had came before me at a clifftop restaurant in the southern Italian town of Muro Lucano along about 1978, a meal involving pasta served with fresh peas (does anyone remember what those taste like?), mushrooms, and tuna—yes, tuna surprise, but with a twist—along with bruschetta and roast veal and a bottle of good Aglianico wine from the slopes of the ominously named Monte Vulture. I think the pasta may have had the tiniest sprinkling of cheese on it, though perhaps not, since an Italian friend of ours once reeled when
my wife asked for a little grated cheese atop her *spaghetti al tonno* and gasped, “Cheese? Weez feesh?” I had doubtless had better meals before, and I have had many exceptional meals in the years since, some in China, some in Italy, some in Mexico, some in my own kitchen. But there, in that smoky Chinese airport, I thought back to that warm evening in 1978. I remembered the meal for several reasons. One was the remarkable freshness of each ingredient; one was the remarkable cheerfulness of the restaurateur, a handsome woman of an indeterminate age. And one, the one that haunted me now, was that as I ate that splendid meal on that magnificent mountaintop, I found myself pondering where all those foods came from. The cheese and the fish were native, more or less; cheese has figured in the Italian diet since the first transhumant herdspeople drove sheep and goats over the Alps, deep in the Neolithic era, and fish of the open sea turned up on Italian plates a moment or two after those Neolithic people launched their boats upon the waves. But the other foods came from farther afield: the peas from Anatolia, the tomatoes and peppers from the foothills of the Andes, the potatoes in my friend’s gnocchi from higher up in those mountains, the rice in another friend’s risotto from China, the wheat in our bread from the highlands of Syria, the basil from India, the olives from the Black Sea, the coffee from the Horn of Africa.

That meal, just as every other meal you and I have ever eaten, was the product of history, a complicated process of exchange and cultural contact (and sometimes cultural collision). Without that process, our larders would be very much the poorer. Imagine life without pizza or spaghetti. Imagine grilled steak without corn on the cob or green beans to
accompany it, a hamburger without french fries, a chili dog without the chili or the slightest hint of catsup. Imagine a world without chocolate ice cream, without steaming hot coffee at breakfast, without pumpkin pie.

It is not that Old World cuisine was bad, to be sure: Henry VIII’s girth suggests that the contemporary culinary scene did not want for material. Still, endless processions of suckling pig and roast stag and pickled beets can weary even the heartiest appetite, and gourmands all over Europe must have been deliriously grateful when Christopher Columbus returned from his first voyage with a ship’s hold full of strange new delicacies from the Indies, among them assorted chiles, avocados, maize, and guavas. A particular treat, at least for southern European palates, was the tomato, which—though not without difficulty—found its way into the cuisine of Italy, where it is called pomodoro, or “golden apple,” as in France the potato is called pomme de terre, or “earth apple.” Italian cooks so thoroughly incorporated the tomato into their repertoire that it is almost impossible to conceive of Italian cuisine without it, a wonderfully accidental transformation.

For centuries the peoples of Europe made do without a battery of foods we rely on today, and they developed a culinary tradition that survives in most particulars in every American home: roast meats, boiled vegetables, sturdy breads of all kinds. Fortunately, other highlights of the early European table, such as the late Roman delicacy of parboiled flamingo in rotted-fish sauce, are not much replicated today. Some, though, deserve revival. Consider one Roman recipe, recorded by Apicius in his cookbook De opositionis et condimentis sive arte coquinaria at around the time of Christ, which details ordinary fare that, given the long European memory for such things, Columbus himself might have eaten. The recipe is slightly adapted for the modern kitchen.

Clean and wash assorted vegetables. Shred and boil them; then remove from heat, let cool, and drain. Remove skin from four pounds calf’s brains.
Crush ten peppercorns in mortar and wet with beef broth. Rub this mixture on brains. Add the vegetables and puree. Add eight lightly beaten eggs. Add a cup of broth, a cup of red wine, and a cup of raisin wine or juice. Oil baking dish. Put mixture in dish and bake until firm (about twenty minutes at 350°). Sprinkle with pepper and serve warm.

Anyone for seconds? Brains are a lovely thing, though we moderns have grown squeamish about eating organs of various kinds, no thanks to spongiform viruses and the like. Even so, until the present, fifteen hundred years after Apicius’s day the basic approach to European cooking had changed little. This fourteenth-century English recipe, adapted from Constance Hieatt and Sharon Butler’s delightful book Pleyn Delit, for a dish called, yes, “Garbage,” would have been right at home in Apicius’s kitchen, or in Columbus’s galley:

Tayke fayre garbages of chykonys, as the head, the fete, the lyverys, and the gysowrys; washe them clene, and caste them in a faire potte, and caste ther-to fresshye brothe of Beef or ellys of moton, and let it boyle; and a-lye it wyth brede, and ley on Pepir and Saffroun, Maces, Clowyse, and a litle verious and salt, and serue forth in the maner as a Stewe.

In other words, take a pound of chicken “garbage”—that is, feet, liver, and gizzards. Wash it thoroughly, and place in a large saucepan with two cups of beef or mutton stock and simmer slowly for an hour. Add a third of a cup of breadcrumbs, a dash each of ground cloves, ground pepper, mace, and saffron, and a teaspoon of lemon juice. Simmer for five minutes, and you are done. But will you be asked to helm the kitchen again?

Culinary exchange is a two-way street. Europe contributed to the cuisine of the Americas as well, and many of the foods we relish today—pizza,
enchiladas, mashed potatoes with gravy—are the happy products of those two far different worlds encountering each other, if so often unhappily.

Because the victor gets to write the histories, we know all too little about the cuisines of the vanquished. Take Native American cuisine, for instance. The first Thanksgiving, in the autumn of 1621, featured only “fowl” and “deer,” the pilgrim Edward Winslow wrote; later feasts included succotash, duck, goose, eels, corn bread, wild plums, and other treats from Indian recipes, and we know about them only because grateful New Englanders took the time to learn how to make them à la indienne. Pre-Columbian cookbooks will one day be discovered, we can hope; perhaps some Maya hieroglyph will one day turn up with the original recipe for guinea-hen tacos. Until then, ethnobotanist Gary Nabhan suggests that a typical Southwestern Indian culinary concoction of, say, 1300 C.E. might have been something like this:

Rehydrate 1.5 cups dried venison or antelope in 2 cups water. Drain excess water. Combine with 2 tsp dried red chile pepper or one cup diced hot green chiles and 3 tsp dried wild oregano [Mexican verbena] leaves [oregano can substitute]. Add 1/2 cup venison-suet or sunflower oil; 2 cups amaranth greens; 1 cup prickly-pear pads, well cleaned and cut into 1-inch cubes; and 1 cup tomatoes. Simmer for 10–15 minutes and serve with warm tortillas.

Thanks to fair ocean currents and a swarm of curious adventurers, we need not imagine life without tomato sauce, guacamole, French fries, chili con carne—or, for that matter, sticky rice, watermelon, amaranth, okra, and eggplant.

Most of the foods we eat today, as I have said, are accidents of history. One species of accident is this: a conqueror enters a new land, observes its people eating something strange and wonderful, tries it, and likes it. That new food becomes part of the conqueror’s repertoire: Columbus sends chile, Pizarro potatoes, Balboa tomatoes, Cortez maize, and in time all Europe is enjoying meals that would not be out of place at a Hopi table, as if they had been there all along.

Sometimes the process of culinary expansion is gentler. We eat basil, at least in part, because of an ancient idea that to do so brings us closer to the gods. Oranges grace our tables because some ancient traveler on the Central Asian trade routes took to their bitterness and found that they fit easily into a saddlebag; thus transportable, it was an easy matter to trade oranges for other things, doubtless including other foods.

And often the process of culinary expansion involves daring. In the charming, food-centric film So I Married an Ax Murderer, Canadian comic Mike Myers, contemplating the strange thing that is haggis (organs again), observes that Scottish cuisine is the only one in the world that is based on a dare. This is not so: the same can be said of nearly every cuisine
in the world, at least at some point in its history. What brave Roman was
commissioned to determine when the flamingo buried in the back yard
was ready to eat? How many Aymara Indians had to die before the potato
was finally bred out of its poisonous ways? How many countless humans
have fallen before the mushroom? What of the proto-Indo-European
steppe dweller who decided that it would be a good idea to raid a beehive
for honey? These are our pioneers, explorers of the table, and one day a
museum will have to be built in their honor.

History is accidental, but the laws of nature are immutable. Food
involves science as well as art, and science can produce some oddities
indeed. When, after the Second World War, Americans sought to fill their
brand-new refrigerators, they had a product of science par excellence to
turn to: colored margarine. Working for Proctor & Gamble, the English
scientist Henry Keyser had developed hydrogenated oils as early as 1907,
but the dairy industry had long pressed for laws requiring that these oils
be colored in order to distinguish them from butter. Fears over the dan-
gers posed by food additives kept margarine a pale white until the war,
when hydrogenated-oil manufacturers decided themselves to color their
products to distinguish them from then-scarce, heavily rationed dairy
products, lest the war effort suffer from unwonted deprivation. The ploy
worked; today Americans use far more margarine and vegetable oil
than butter, and some dairies even color their butter yellow to attract
customers.

Science tells us, too, that merely to look at food causes most of us to
experience a significant rise in brain dopamine, the neurotransmitter asso-
ciated with feelings of pleasure and reward. The response is just that of a
drug addict, and a psychiatrist reviewing those findings remarks, “Eating
is a highly reinforcing behavior, just like taking illicit drugs. But this is
the first time anyone has shown that the dopamine system can be triggered
by food when there is no pleasure associated with it since the subjects
don’t eat the food. This provides us with new clues about the mechanisms
that lead people to eat other than just for pleasure, and in this respect may
help us understand why some people overeat.” If we have come so far
unmoored from evolution’s cable that merely to see a picture of food can
send us slavering, if we are all secret addicts at the table, then we might just
as well throw all caution to the wind and enjoy something real: not marga-
rine but butter, not genetically modified ketchup but a real tomato grown
in real sun, not hormonally overladen beef but a thin slice of forbidden
barnyard veal—the food they eat in France, in other words, where some-
thing like civilization still reigns.

Knowing about where our food comes from in history, I think, enhan-
ces our understanding of where it comes from today. American taste has
shifted, thank the heavens, in the last half-century, toward greater con-
sumption of fresh, organically produced vegetables and other foodstuffs
—at least for those who can afford them in an increasingly class-structured, polarized nation. This pattern will likely continue, so that at least one stratum of society supports a healthy if boutique-like farming culture. Yet, some economists warn, it is likely that as farmland gives way to housing developments and shopping malls, as the world’s population grows, and as the supply of fossil fuels declines, the cost of food will rise substantially, perhaps as high as half of net income. If this in fact happens, then grain production, so much of which is given over to livestock feed, will be diverted to human consumption, so that Americans and other first-worlders will in time eat what the rest of the world eats: grains and vegetables, with meat making up only a small portion of our caloric intake.

This, of course, would not be such a bad thing, but it would be a dislocating one for many eaters used to a steady diet of hamburgers and hot links. Hunger has more often than not been a product less of the land’s failure to produce food than rapacious politics, as with the potato famine in Ireland and the even more destructive famines in Russia and China in the twentieth century. Yet the near future may well bring hunger of a more generalized sort. In China alone, even with the success of the old one-child policy (and, as Charles Darwin observed, humans are the only animals who have fewer babies the better fed they are), annual grain consumption is estimated to rise dramatically by the year 2030 to 400 kilograms per person, or 641,000,000 tons of grain a year. China will have to import about half that amount; the problem is, even that half is twice the current annual export from all grain-producing countries combined. Someone’s bowl will be unfilled, and by the millions.

This book blends goodly quantities of history and food lore, science and nutrition, folktales, and downright trivia to what I hope is a tasty end. As a sometime “nature writer”—I prefer the noted editor Jack Shoemaker’s formulation “landscape writer”—I have long been interested in food and its ways, convinced that, just as our making good cities teaches us to protect wilder climes, so learning about what we eat can make us better guardians of the garden and table. That trust may be misplaced, but becoming better consumers is certainly within the sphere of enlightened self-interest, given how many opportunities the present market offers to ingest things that are not good for us, that come from deep in the bowels of dubious labs, that do not much seem like food at all. Think of dessert toppings, or cheese puffs, or most industrial hamburgers—or, for that matter, think of what passes for tomatoes in so many groceries.

I insert this note, in closing, with red flags and klaxons: I like foods that are spicy, pungent, drenched in olive oil, salty, smoky, savory. The recipes in this book, selected for their anthropological and historical interest as well as their capacity to yield good-tasting things, appeal to that sensibility. I have tested all of them at one time or another, but beware: they are adapted to my taste, which is certainly not everyone’s—and which may
well alarm medically trained or otherwise sensitive readers. Your mileage may vary, so, as with any recipe, you should feel free—indeed, encouraged and exhorted—to experiment so that the taste of the food you make and eat conforms exactly to your idea of what good food should taste like. Similarly, I do not list the number of servings a dish yields, holding, in the words of my much admired friend Jim Harrison, that “small portions are for small and inactive people.” Live large until your body tells you otherwise; eat fresh and close to the earth, stick to olive oil and broccoli and wine, stay away from corn syrup in all of its nefarious guises, and—or so I tell myself—you will be all right.

I repeat: this is primarily a book of food history, science, and lore, and not of cookery strictly speaking. Be forewarned, then, that you put a bite of unfamiliar food into your mouth at your own risk. But you knew that, as did the brave men and women who preceded us, generation after generation, to taste and test the foods of the world, bringing them at considerable risk but with great rewards from every corner of the world to our tables. Blessings be upon them, and forgiveness, too.

FURTHER READING

INTRODUCTION

Marion Nestle, *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* (University of California Press, 2002).
If you were a member of the Gilead tribe, back in the Palestine of about 1200 B.C.E., you would have called an ear of wheat a *shibboleth*. If you were from the neighboring and related but rival tribe of Ephraim, you would have called that same ear of wheat *sibboleth*, for your dialect of ancient Hebrew would have been without what is technically called the voiceless postalveolar fricative, the *sh* sound. That lack would have been a source of trouble when Gilead went to war against Ephraim, as the book of Judges 12:1–15 relates:

> Then Jephthah gathered together all the men of Gilead, and fought with Ephraim: and the men of Gilead smote Ephraim, because they said, Ye Gileadites are fugitives of Ephraim among the Ephraimites, and among the Manassites.

> And the Gileadites took the passages of Jordan before the Ephraimites: and it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, Let me go over; that the men of Gilead said unto him, art thou an Ephraimite? If he say Nay;

> Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand.

Thus, the word for a kind of food became the epicene term for those many dividing lines by which families, cliques, interest groups, professions, tribes, and nations distinguish themselves from one another, usually with an eye to expressing superiority in the difference. That *shibboleth*