

SOME FOOD FOR HISTORICAL THOUGHT

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First you need to get the students' attention. If the idea is to have students learn, as opposed to doing your "duty" by showing up, giving them information, and leaving at the end of the hour, then you need to get their attention. Because of the experience some students have had all through their educational careers, they have certain expectations about what they will find in a history class. While some students undoubtedly take comfort in knowing pretty much what to expect, in a large number of cases resistance comes with these expectations. Perhaps they have encountered one too many historians who modeled themselves on drill sergeants. The resistant ones have heard and done that before--whatever the "that" might be--and they are not looking forward to listening to it or doing it again. They come to history class prepared to do battle, even if it is only in the form of passive resistance. Without even considering a sense of personal fulfillment, history classes today are often just one of many options students can select, and administrators do like to see courses full.

One way to win over this type of student is to call attention to an aspect of the material that up to this point in their educational careers they have not viewed as "history." One of the great tools in teaching history to college students is the unexpected. While it might not work for everyone, I have had a fair amount of success in using food as a way to get around the defenses of resistant students. By this I mean both the study of food as an academic exercise and the preparation and consumption of food within the classroom.

For those who are interested in using this approach, material is available and indeed a fair amount of it has been for some time. For an historian of early modern Great Britain such as myself, the agricultural revolution in the Low Countries and England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as well as the Irish potato famine of the mid-nineteenth century come to mind. Of late, as a result of the river of scholarship that flowed in great volume in and around the theme of Columbus and 1492, a small scale flood of food-related books and articles has rolled into view. A good deal of it is focused on the Columbian exchange. The compilation of articles entitled *Seeds of Change*, edited by H.J. Viola and C. Margolis, is but one example. It has articles about both the impact of food from the Americas on the rest of the world and European food raising practices on agriculture in the Americas.¹ In recent years the volume of material published about the study of food for scholarly purposes seems to have increased and it has become something of an historical subfield. Perhaps using

¹Herman J. Viola and Carolyn Margolis, editors, *Seeds of Change* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

cultural anthropology as a model, the subjects cover all aspects of the topic from where food is grown, to how it is transported, marketed, and prepared, to what individuals ate it, and when it was eaten. Happily this research has not just centered on one or two countries, but has spread to nations in all parts of the world. Nor is it limited to the modern era. There are good sources for both scholarship and recipes going back at least as far as the Middle Ages. An early example is Barbara Norman's *Tales of the Table*. She has menus from contemporary sources going as back as far as ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.²

While food might be a novel area of study for most history students and one that has the potential for stimulating interest, there is no getting around the fact that historical monographs about this subject can be as dull and pedantic as any other. Yet just as is true of other historical topics, with careful selection, the potential for stimulating interest makes it worth the effort to do the necessary sorting. Then the question is how to present the material. While whole history courses can be devoted to the study of food, my approach has been to present the subject within the context of an already existing course, for spice, so to speak. Approaching the subject in this way, one technique is to use it as the basis for a series of problem-solving exercises and another is to use the study of food and its production to help understand both society and politics.

Potatoes are a good place to start. Their migration from South America to Europe and their impact on everything from making vodka in Russia to becoming part of the typical meal in Ireland opens up all sorts of interesting questions. What they did in these countries for drink and food before the potato came along is the most obvious. William McNeill's article "American Food Crops in the Old World" is a good starting point for this investigation.³ Yet my favorite starting point for problem-solving remains spaghetti with meatballs and tomato sauce. For one thing, virtually everyone in the class will know what it is and will identify the dish as Italian. It is at this point that either the instructor as a lecturer or students in a research assignment can deconstruct the dish and discover when and how it became Italian. Sophie D. Coe's *America's First Cuisines* is a good source for much of this type of information.⁴

From there focusing on the tomato is often useful. A whole series of study areas present themselves by tracing its origins in Aztec culture, its resemblance to the European plant, the deadly nightshade, and the slow acceptance by the Europeans of the idea that tomatoes were more than just decoration. Another key question that

²Barbara Norman, *Tales of the Table* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1972).

³Viola and Margolis, *Seeds of Change*, 43-59.

⁴Sophie D. Coe, *America's First Cuisines* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

follows is how could the Europeans watch the Aztecs eat tomatoes without ill effect and then have reservations about the fruit for themselves. Continuing down that path, it is possible to explore European attitudes toward the inhabitants of the Americas. Here it is worth noting that the plants that were used to feed people in the so-called New World, such as maize or corn, often first were used to feed farm animals when the plants were introduced in Europe. Once again Coe's *America's First Cuisines* is a good source of information about a large number of American plants that spread to the rest of the world.

An effective corollary to this discussion concerns the reluctance of most societies to adopt new food over the short term. To return to the potato, even though it was not classed as poisonous by the Europeans, it took over two centuries before it made a regular appearance in European cookbooks. For the Spaniards settling in the Caribbean and the Americas, their tastes in food meant importing European products in the form of plants such as wheat and animals such as cattle. This importation in turn had a profound ecological impact on the newly occupied lands. On the popular reading level Kirkpatrick Sale in *The Conquest of Paradise* explores many of these issues, albeit in a rather polemical fashion.⁵ For those who want to continue this type of study, after 1945 the appearance of American-style fast food restaurants and cola drinks in France, even on the Champs Elysees, has potential as a focal point.

It is sometimes useful to present students with a problem that is extremely difficult to solve, and making wheat into bread is one of those problems. Once a society learns how to do it, the process is straightforward enough, but the question is how humans figured out the process. While birds and small rodents no doubt ate wild wheat as they currently do the domestic varieties, it is difficult to comprehend how people went from imitating these animals by eating the raw seeds to grinding and baking. Along those same lines, cassava provides another interesting case study. Here the poison is real and not imagined. The root in its raw form contains a poison that South American Indians traditionally use to tip their arrows and to squeeze from the roots into ponds in order to bring fish to the surface. Once the liquid poison is removed, however, the remaining root material makes a tasty, nutritious, and long-lasting bread. Again, the question is how humans figured out that it was possible to eat the residual material. Fred Olsen's *On the Trail of the Arawaks* looks at this and other problems concerning the study of this tribe.⁶

When it comes to using food to study the development of society and politics, if one extends the definition of food to include condiments, then sugar quickly comes into focus. Even without consideration of obesity and tooth decay, it is possible to

⁵Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Conquest of Paradise* (New York: Knopf, 1990).

⁶Fred Olsen, *On the Trail of the Arawaks* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974).

argue that sugar has been responsible for as much human misery as opium or cocaine. Here Sidney W. Mintz's book *Sweetness and Power* is particularly useful.⁷ The author looks at everything from what makes sugar addictive to its production by slaves to the wars that were fought to gain control of sugar-producing areas.

A related area of interest is the feeding of slaves in the Caribbean. Up until the American Revolution, a large percentage of the food for slaves came from the thirteen mainland colonies. But during and after the war trade between the new United States and the British colonies became illegal. With the possible exception of planters on Jamaica, most of the planters on the other British islands believed they could not afford to assign space for growing food as well as sugar. Their great concern became to develop a food source that was nutritious but did not take up much room. What they wanted was bread that grew on trees—breadfruit trees. Such a plant grew in the Polynesian Islands, and in 1788 the British government decided to give Lieutenant William Bligh command of a ship named the *Bounty* in order to transport the trees to the West Indies. While both Hollywood and the publishing industry have produced much Bligh material, two relatively recent books deal with the breadfruit and its problems: Gavin Kennedy's *Bligh* and my study, *The Fortunate Adversities of William Bligh*.⁸

For those who use biography as part of their classes, Bligh's patron, Sir Joseph Banks, presents interesting possibilities. As a young man Banks traveled with Captain James Cook on his first voyage to the Pacific. Banks then spent the rest of his life sponsoring the collection of useful plants and animals that he housed at the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew, just up the Thames from London. Besides his adventures with Captain Cook, some of his adventures in sheep rustling make interesting reading. Two useful recent books are H.B. Carter's *Sir Joseph Banks 1743-1820* and C. Lyte's *Sir Joseph Banks*.⁹

While university students can and do respond favorably to written material about food, they respond even better when they can sample the food as well. Over the last twenty years I have organized at least one banquet per year, using historical recipes and menus. The number of people involved have ranged from five to around thirty. For full effect, sometimes I have invited groups specializing in early modern English music and dance to perform at these banquets. However, it is not necessary to pull out all the stops every time. I have tried everything from cooking something as a

⁷Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power* (New York: Viking/Penguin, 1985).

⁸Gavin Kennedy, *Bligh* (London: Duckworth, 1978), and Roy E. Schreiber, *The Fortunate Adversities of William Bligh* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991).

⁹H.B. Carter, *Sir Joseph Banks* (London: Oak Knoll, 1987), and C. Lyte, *Sir Joseph Banks* (London: David & Charles, 1980).

demonstration, to having the students fix dishes at home and bringing them into class, to finding a kitchen and having them work together to prepare the meal. On the whole, I would say the group preparation is the most effective. Except for those students who are comfortable in the kitchen, there is a certain uneasiness that this meal cannot possibly work. Having them support each other in the undertaking tends to overcome this uneasiness. I should also say that in all this time I have never had a bad meal, and at least one group of students threatened not to take the second half of the course I was teaching unless a banquet was promised in the syllabus.

Despite my enthusiasm, everything has its limitations, including the use of food in a history class. As late as the eighteenth century, even the French and the British were unlikely to put exact quantities in their written recipes. Although modern authors have converted a wide range, including the most ancient of these recipes, into dishes for the modern kitchen, the further back one goes and the less literate the cultural source, the more the dish becomes a matter of educated guesswork. Even so, it is not unfair to say that such a description fits just about any topic of historical study during the pre-modern era.

Regardless of the problems and how the food is prepared, one of the reasons the meal is effective as a teaching device, is that, whatever the limitations and approximations, it gives students a real life example of how the people we study in history are not exactly like us. Their tastes were, literally, tangibly different from ours. All the books and videos I cram into a semester will not get that message across as thoroughly as that one meal.

Along these lines, for my sixteenth-century English history classes I usually include a dish called a spinach-date fritter. The recipe is found in Lorna J. Sass's *To the Queen's Taste*.¹⁰ It is "English" upper-class food that has intriguing ingredients. According to contemporary sources, spinach did not appear in England until the mid-sixteenth century. As for the other principal ingredients and condiments--eggs, salt, bread crumbs, ale, flour, dates, currents, pepper, brown sugar, cinnamon, and ginger--more than half of them did not originate in England. The dish thus becomes an oblique way of getting the students to discuss what the upper-class English of that era meant when they called something "English."

That last comment is exactly the point of this whole undertaking. Food is a way to get students into historical topics and to get them to think about how and why things happened. Any time that happens consistently in a class, I try to keep my whining about students to a minimum.

¹⁰Lorna J. Sass, *To the Queen's Taste* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1976), 74-75.

Selected Reading List

In addition to the books mentioned above, the following is a short bibliography of food related books, primarily for the early modern era. The list includes scholarly works, recipe books, and books that combine the two.

Roz Denny, *The Tudor Kitchens Cookery Book* (Hampton Court, n.d.). This is a modernized series of sixteenth-century English recipes with a brief bibliography. Christopher Driver and Michelle Berriedale-Johnson, *Pepys at Table* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). Although there is a short historical introduction, most of this book contains recipes from seventeenth-century England. Both the contemporary and the modern versions are given. A list of contemporary cookbooks is included.

Henry Hobhouse, *Seeds of Change--Five Plants that Transformed Mankind* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985). Quinine, the potato, sugar cane, cotton, and tea are the five plants discussed.

Madge Lorwin, *Dining with William Shakespeare* (New York: Atheneum, 1976). Using Shakespeare for inspiration, a series of menus for feasts and recipes are described. Some of the condiments and spices are difficult to obtain, but there are usable recipes, especially the breads.

Stephen Mennell, *All Manners of Food* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985). This is a historical study of French and English foods that tries to account for the variations in taste between the two countries.

Lorna J. Sass, *To the King's Taste - Richard II's Book of Feast and Recipes* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1975). Some of the recipes are flavored with spices that make them quite surprising to modern tastes.

_____, *Dinner with Tom Jones - Eighteenth Century Cookery* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1977). The recipes are very close to modern British cooking.

Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Tastes of Paradise* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992). The subtitle is a social history of spices, stimulants, and intoxicants.

Jennifer Stead, *Food and Cooking in 18th Century Britain* (Birmingham: English Heritage, 1985). This is a very brief historical study coupled with several simple recipes.

Barbara Ketcham Wheaton, *Savoring the Past--The French Kitchen & Table from 1300 to 1789* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983). While this book is mainly a historical study, it does contain some recipes.