

# A CULTURAL HISTORY OF FOOD IN THE MEDIEVAL AGE

EDITED BY MASSIMO MONTANARI

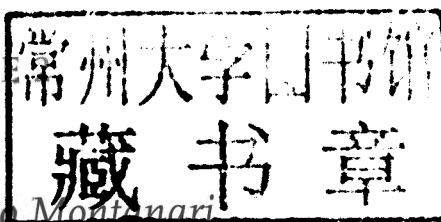


A CULTURAL HISTORY  
OF FOOD

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# IN THE MEDIEVAL AGE

VOLUME



*Edited by Massimo Montanari*

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**A CULTURAL HISTORY  
OF FOOD**

VOLUME 2

## **A Cultural History of Food**

*General Editors: Fabio Parasecoli and Peter Scholliers*

### **Volume 1**

A Cultural History of Food in Antiquity

*Edited by Paul Erdkamp*

### **Volume 2**

A Cultural History of Food in the Medieval Age

*Edited by Massimo Montanari*

### **Volume 3**

A Cultural History of Food in the Renaissance

*Edited by Ken Albala*

### **Volume 4**

A Cultural History of Food in the Early Modern Age

*Edited by Beat Kümin*

### **Volume 5**

A Cultural History of Food in the Age of Empire

*Edited by Martin Bruegel*

### **Volume 6**

A Cultural History of Food in the Modern Age

*Edited by Amy Bentley*

## SERIES PREFACE

GENERAL EDITORS, FABIO PARASECOLI  
AND PETER SCHOLLIERS

*A Cultural History of Food* presents an authoritative survey from ancient times to the present. This set of six volumes covers nearly 3,000 years of food and its physical, spiritual, social, and cultural dimensions. Volume editors and authors, representing different nationalities and cultural traditions, constitute the cutting edge in historical research on food and offer an overview of the field that reflects the state of the art of the discipline. While the volumes focus mostly on the West (Europe in its broadest sense and North America), they also draw in comparative material and each volume concludes with a brief final chapter on contemporaneous developments in food ideas and practices outside the West. These works will contribute to the expansion of the food history research in Asia, Africa, Oceania, and South America, which is already growing at an increasingly fast pace.

The six volumes, which follow the traditional approach to examining the past in Western cultures, divide the history of food as follows:

Volume 1: A Cultural History of Food in Antiquity (800 BCE–500 CE)

Volume 2: A Cultural History of Food in the Medieval Age (500–1300)

Volume 3: A Cultural History of Food in the Renaissance (1300–1600)

Volume 4: A Cultural History of Food in the Early Modern Age  
(1600–1800)

Volume 5: A Cultural History of Food in the Age of Empire (1800–1900)

Volume 6: A Cultural History of Food in the Modern Age (1920–2000)

This periodization does not necessarily reflect the realities and the historical dynamics of non-Western regions, but the relevance of cultural and material exchanges among different civilizations in each period is emphasized.

Each volume discusses the same themes in its chapters:

1. *Food Production*. These chapters examine agriculture, husbandry, fishing, hunting, and foraging at any given period, considering the environmental impact of technological and social innovations, and the adaptation to the climate and environment changes.
2. *Food Systems*. These chapters explore the whole range of the transportation, distribution, marketing, advertising, and retailing of food, emphasizing trade, commerce, and the international routes that have crisscrossed the world since antiquity.
3. *Food Security, Safety, and Crises*. We cannot have a complete picture of the history of food without discussing how societies dealt with moments of crisis and disruption of food production and distribution, such as wars, famines, shortages, and epidemics. These essays reflect on the cultural, institutional, economic, and social ways of coping with such crises.
4. *Food and Politics*. These chapters focus on the political aspects of public food consumption: food aspects of public ceremonies and feasts, the impact on public life, regulations, controls, and taxation over food and alcohol production, exchange, and consumption.
5. *Eating Out*. The communal and public aspects of eating constitute the main focus of these essays. Authors consider hospitality for guests, at home and in public spaces (banquets and celebrations), and discuss public places to eat and drink in urban and rural environments, including street food, marketplaces, and fairs.
6. *Professional Cooking, Kitchens, and Service Work*. These chapters look at the various roles involved in food preparation outside the family nucleus: slaves, cooks, servants, waiters, *maitre d'hotel* etc., investigating also the most relevant cooking techniques, technologies, and tools for each period, giving special consideration to innovations.
7. *Family and Domesticity*. The acquisition, shopping and storage, preparation, consumption, and disposal of food in a domestic setting

are among the most important aspects of food culture. These chapters analyze family habits in different periods of time, paying particular attention to gender roles and the material culture of the domestic kitchen.

8. *Body and Soul*. These chapters examine fundamental material aspects such as nutritional patterns, food constituents, and food-related diseases. Furthermore, spiritual and cultural aspects of thinking about and consuming food are highlighted, including religion, philosophy, as well as health and diet theories.
9. *Food Representations*. These essays analyze cultural and discursive reflections about food, which not only contributed to the way people conceive of food, but also to the social and geographical diffusion of techniques and behavior.
10. *World Developments*. These brief chapters overview developments, dynamics, products, food-related behaviors, social structures, and concepts in cultural environments that often found themselves at the margins of Western modernity.

Rather than embracing the encyclopedic model, the authors apply a broad multidisciplinary framework to examine the production, distribution, and consumption of food, as grounded in the cultural experiences of the six historical periods. This structure allows readers to obtain a broad overview of a period by reading a volume, or to follow a theme through history by reading the relevant chapter in each volume.

Highly illustrated, the full six-volume set combines to present the most authoritative and comprehensive survey available on food through history.



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# Introduction

MASSIMO MONTANARI

*Translated by Leah Ashe*

## WHEN EUROPEAN (FOOD) CULTURE WAS BORN

The Middle Ages are a time of special importance in the history of European food culture, because of the simple fact that Europe was *born* during this period, a new entity that was cultural even before it was political. The transformation was a radical one, a veritable metamorphosis that created an entirely new set of geo-cultural identities. On the one hand, it reconstructed the Mediterranean, a factor that had earlier resolutely established the commonality and unity of the Greco-Roman world, by introducing new and important differences that distinguished the northern coast from the southern one. At the same time, it linked the northern part of that world to a new cultural horizon, one defined largely by the populations beyond its northern and eastern borders. Via this double operation of addition and subtraction, Europe took shape.

The Roman Empire, like Greek society before it, defined its cultural characteristics around the Mediterranean, the great *lake* that standardized (or at least bound together) customs and lifestyles, tastes and practices, celebrating a robust exchange of men, merchandise, and ideas from one province to the next, from one shore of *mare nostrum* (*our sea* in Latin) to the other. The sudden entry into that world of those the Romans called

barbarians—comprising a mixture of ethnic groups, but for the most part all of German stock—signaled not only the end of the Roman Empire in the west, but also a crisis for its very model of civilization. The Romans, building on the vestiges of Greek traditions that they inherited, had built that model around ideas of the *city* and of *agriculture*, complementary concepts (agriculture understood as the way to feed those living in the city) that symbolized the desire of civilized man to free himself from his wild state by adopting artificial—that is, *man-made*—constructs in which to live, work, and produce that which did not exist in nature.<sup>1</sup> Bread, wine, and olive oil, the triad at the base of the Greek and Roman dietary models, symbolized an ideological construction that contrasted culture and nature as positive and negative values, respectively. Those with different lifestyles (that is, those who used means of production and had consumption habits not based on agriculture) were, for that reason alone, *barbarians*. Thus, Greek and Latin scribes were scandalized—or perhaps amused—at the central dietary role that Germanic peoples gave to meat and animal fat, milk and butter, wild fruits—in other words, to the resources of the forest, used for the wild grazing of animals, hunting, and gathering.<sup>2</sup> To be clear, such activities were important for everyone on an economic front, even for the Romans; but the Romans tended, in a way, to hide these aspects of their culture, to exclude them from the contexts of positive values and imagery.

Then, the unthinkable happened. The barbarians penetrated the borders of the Empire little by little, subjugating many of its provinces and becoming (in the fifth century) the new ruling order. Their culture and their customs took hold—as those of the winners invariably do—and challenged the values that defined what it meant to be Roman. It was a conflict that was a veritable ideological war<sup>3</sup>: the culture of bread and wine, of agriculture and the city, bitterly pitted itself (so strong was the symbolic value that these held for those nostalgic for the old regime) against the exaltation of meat and wild foods, against a culture that put the forest at the crux of daily matters rather than excluding it—as the older tradition had—from the predominant value system.

Nonetheless, with the passing of time, the conflict weakened and, though not disappearing entirely, gave way to a process of integration that changed both cultures. A progressive symbiosis between the two opposing models, a spectacular phenomenon of acculturation—to use the language

of anthropology—ultimately created new models of production and eating.<sup>4</sup> The culture of the new rulers took hold and spread, but it blended with the enduring allure of the Roman culture, transmitted and promoted, in turn, via the practice of Christianity, which, with regard to dietary models as well as in many other matters, evolved as the witness and heir to the Roman culture. Bread, wine, and oil, invoked in the Christian liturgy as fundamental instruments of worship (bread and wine for the celebration of the Eucharist, oil for the celebration of other Sacraments), assumed a symbolic force that re-asserted their ideological—and economic—centrality with even greater decisiveness. This stood in sharp contrast to the centrality that meat had *also* begun to have in the symbolic and economic system of the society that emerged from the period of the invasions. The result was a new dietary model, neither Roman nor Germanic, but Roman *and* Germanic—or, more accurately, Roman-*Christian* and Germanic.

Even ecclesiastic regulations regarding dietary behavior helped to standardize the new consumption models of the Europeans.<sup>5</sup> The Church required the faithful to abstain from meat and animal fats for quite a number of days each year: during Lent (the forty-day period preceding Easter); on certain weekdays (which differed according to local custom); on the vigils of the main holy days; and at various other times throughout the year. Altogether, more than one in every three days were days of fasting and forced the faithful to turn to vegetable fats (olive oil and other substitute oils) and other so-called lean or fasting foods (fish and vegetables, and in some cases also eggs and dairy products). However, at the same time, this implicitly confirmed the role of meat and animal products as the normal, daily foundation of the diet. It also strengthened the idea that holy days and celebrations (Sundays, Saints' anniversaries, Christmas, Easter, and so on) in fact *required* meat. Whether it is present or absent (often substituted), meat is always the protagonist in the public banquets that in medieval Europe constitute an essential element of social life and communication (see chapter 5 by Alban Gautier in this volume).

All this, while not eliminating the differences in traditions and tastes that existed between one region of Continental Europe and the next, created a certain uniformity with regard to food customs by forcing all Christians to *alternate* the use of animal- and plant-based products at their home tables. Consumption models that had, up to that point, been antithetical or

mutually exclusive now constituted part of a unitary system; a single, homogenous food culture. Bread and meat—food of the land and food from the animal world—waged a daily fight for supremacy, but ultimately, even with considerable tensions, managed to share the alimentary space and give to each component its moments of glory.

The symbiosis between different economies and cultures yielded a unique combination: an agro-forestal-pastoral production model that is likely the single most characteristic feature of European food consumption during the first millennium. *Terra et silva*, “cultivated lands and forests,” appear inevitably as a pair in documents describing the assets of landowners and estates, no matter how large or small.<sup>6</sup> The systematic mixing of different landscapes and resources attests to a food regimen which was not always secure—hunger was a common affliction during these centuries, as Giuliano Pinto explains in this volume—but which nonetheless found its strength in variety. The fruits of the land (grains, legumes, vegetables) are frequently integrated with those offered by the *wild* (game, fish, animals raised in the forests and clearings).

Not everyone ate the same: abundance was a privilege of the few and, precisely because of this, eating in large quantities was one of the main signs of prestige and power—a fundamental symbol of *difference*—during the Early Middle Ages. This does not take away from the fact that all social classes enjoyed a broad spectrum of resources and, in particular, the regular inclusion in their diets of animal products (meat, fat, and dairy) as well as vegetable products. This is a point that merits emphasizing, because it is something quite atypical—truly anomalous—relative to all other periods in the history of food. European peasants of the period enjoyed a diet that was certainly better balanced than that of other periods, both earlier and later, characterized instead by the massive predominance of grains and the overwhelming scarcity of animal products. This did not eliminate the risks and difficulties of a time marked by severe natural and social scourges, but it did constitute a real help in meeting the challenge of daily survival.

During the centuries in which the outlines of European civilization were being defined, a new political-religious power took hold of the southern shores of the Mediterranean: Islam, the bearer of different cultural and food models that were, at least in part, in conflict with European ones. At the beginning of the seventh century, the Mediterranean was no longer

a sort of internal lake, as it had been for centuries, but became instead a boundary sea.<sup>7</sup> Afterwards, and in part as a result, European culture (including its food culture) began to assume a new identity, one leaning more toward the centre of the continent than toward the old *mare nostrum*.<sup>8</sup>

The religious, political, and military clash between Christian Europe and Islam easily found its dietary symbols. The religion of bread and wine could not help but strongly oppose itself to a world that had forbidden the very consumption of wine, and, though familiar with bread, used grains primarily to make flat breads, pasta, and couscous (and in any case, certainly did not endow bread with the sacred connotations that Christianity did). Another fundamental difference was the exclusion of pork—a primary resource in the European forest economy—from the Islamic table, and precisely at the moment that it was assuming an absolute centrality in the food customs of Christian Europe.

Paradoxically, on the northern shores of the Mediterranean the contrast with the new Islamic civilization allowed food and food-related values with very different geographic and cultural origins to become European—in fact, *above all else*, European. Bread and wine, old symbols of the Mediterranean civilization, transferred their identities to the Continent, so much so that even today a search for the culture of bread and wine will lead most obviously to Europe—not to the areas of the Fertile Crescent where it in fact began. The image of pork was reinforced, too: while once it had been the alimentary symbol of northern Europe, it became, during the Middle Ages, the meat *par excellence* of the Europeans, even in the Mediterranean regions: the cultures of *prosciutto* and *jamón*—cured hams—that developed in Italy and Spain constitute a perfect example of these dynamics.

The relationship between European and Islamic food cultures, however, was not simply one of opposition and reciprocal otherness. Despite the differences—which in fact served to better define a European identity—the boundary between Europe and Islam established itself from the beginning as a fertile area of exchange. Largely via Spain and Sicily, the two primary channels for interaction, the Arabs introduced new products and new flavors to Europe.<sup>9</sup> It was the Arabs who brought to the Western world two elements that would come to play important roles in European food during the centuries to follow, altering, at least in part, the most basic flavors of its cuisines: citrus fruits (bitter oranges, lemons, citrons) and cane sugar.

The sweet-and-sour flavor that the Romans had attained by mixing honey with vinegar now assumed more delicate tones in the combination of citrus and sugar. Other products introduced by the Arabs included eggplants, artichokes, and spinach, and even the production of almonds increased. But there were imports that turned out to be even more important. One was rice, which spread throughout Sicily and Spain. The other was pasta, which the Romans had in fact used in a wide, flat form similar to *lasagna* but which became an authentic category of food in its full variety of forms (thick, thin, short, long, hollow, stuffed) only during the Middle Ages. The Middle Ages also brought—thanks to the contributions of the Arabs and Jews—the Middle Eastern technique of drying pasta, thus preserving it for long periods of time and making it possible to trade over long distances. The practice of drying pasta is documented in Europe from the beginning of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and it is in Arab-influenced Sicily that we find the first industry dedicated to producing dry pasta for export.<sup>10</sup>

At least through the eleventh century—until the beginning of the Crusades—the Arabs continued to act as the critical bridge in linking Europe and the East in trade. They were also important in spreading and strengthening the role of spices, which, though not entirely new, would become one of the most characteristic features of medieval European cuisine.<sup>11</sup> Starting from the period of the Crusades, European merchants directly acquired their spices on the Asian markets, managing trade connections between East and West. However, these exchanges had existed for centuries thanks to the Arabic mediation, which represented a powerful factor in the development and the renewal of western European cuisine. At the same time the Roman model survived—faithful to its past but also stuck in time—in the areas dominated by the Byzantine Empire, which were more directly connected to the ancient culture and traditions.

Around the year 1000, as a consequence of all this, Europe had developed a common—but not uniform—food culture. The attempts of Charlemagne and his successors to politically and culturally standardize Europe (on the political aspects of medieval food history, see chapter 4 by Jean-Pierre Devroey in this volume) did not survive beyond the collapse of the Carolingian Empire at the end of the ninth century; and in any case, those attempts were limited largely toward ordering and coordinating a collection of diverse traditions rather than eradicating them entirely. The



same complexity inherent in the new model of production and eating that blended the agrarian and forest economies created the possibility for countless local variants tied to specific environmental resources, territorial characteristics, technological know-how, traditional forms of knowledge, and, not least of all, taste. A Europe of wine, bordering the Mediterranean, still contrasted a Europe of beer in the center and north of the Continent (although the wine border reached more to the north than it does nowadays), and niches of cider consumers remained in certain traditionally Celtic zones such as Brittany and England. These regional characteristics have survived, to some extent, into the present day, as have other basic contrasts between Roman Europe and Germanic Europe. Bread, which had become the food par excellence of the Europeans during the Middle Ages, has thus played different roles in different regions. The Mediterranean countries have considered bread as a food of daily sustenance ever since the classical era, unequivocally part of every meal—so much so that in every house, as in every restaurant and canteen, it is still brought to the table along with dishes and silverware, much as part of the table setting. In northern parts of Europe, on the other hand, diners must ask for bread, just as they must ask for any other food. The notion of *companatico*, the foods eaten *along with bread*—that is, the idea that bread is the basis of the meal that everything else *goes with*—is not at all universal. Rather it is limited—even in language—to the countries and cultures most closely related with the Roman tradition. Similarly, Arab influences, though evident in the culinary traditions of Europe in its entirety, remain strongest in the Mediterranean countries that had established the closest relationships with Islam, or where they ruled for a long time; for example, the Sicilian and Spanish gastronomies emerge as those most strongly characterized (today, as in the Middle Ages) by a sweetness linked originally to the cultivation of cane sugar in these areas of Arab occupation.

The taste for meat—along with its level of consumption—also varied from one region of Europe to the next. Pigs, sheep, and cows were not appreciated everywhere in the same way, due, here too, to a complex confluence of factors. Part of the explanation is simply economic, linked to geography, soil, and climate: the oak forests where pigs were traditionally left to graze characterized much of the European landscape, but in certain zones of both northern and southern Europe, grassy pastures, where