

# A CULTURAL HISTORY OF FOOD IN THE MODERN AGE

EDITED BY AMY BENTLEY



A CULTURAL HISTORY  
OF FOOD

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# IN THE MODERN AGE

VOLUME 6

*Edited by Amy Bentley*



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**A CULTURAL HISTORY  
OF FOOD**

VOLUME 6

## **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

AMY BENTLEY

Food—not the first subject most people think of to tell the story of history and culture. Upon reflection, however, what better subject could there be? At the base of human existence, food plays a role in virtually every arena that is important to our lives: from the rituals of daily life, leisure activities, and aesthetic pleasure, to politics and government, war, social interchange, and commerce. Food fuels—literally and metaphorically—economic practices (domestic food-relief programs), social movements (lunch counter sit-ins, counter-globalization rallies and protests), business–government relationships (agriculture and farm subsidies), and international policy (famine relief and military alliances). Food not only helps determine both individual and collective identity, but it is also deeply enmeshed in political institutions and economic health. In fact, the consumption of food is an extraordinarily social activity laden with complex and shifting layers of meaning. Not only what we eat, but how and why we eat, tell us much about society, history, cultural change, and humans' views of themselves.

Food has always played a major role, and the ways in which it is produced, processed, distributed, controlled, consumed, and portrayed reveal not only the hierarchies of power, but also the subtle, multi-leveled challenges to that power by groups and individuals in society. Whether minimally processed foods (wheat, cooking oil), industrially manufactured

items (instant ramen, Coca-Cola), or hand-made creations (tamales, holiday sweets), people imbue particular foods with deep-seated meaning and emotion and will go to great lengths to preserve or promote them, regardless of whether they are involved in their production (farmers, processors) or merely their consumption (tea drinking). Not only is food intimately, and intricately, tied to group image, but it is bound to national identity, and a nation's power or lack thereof. Since food is power—and an abundance of food can mean a surfeit of power—nations have been shaped, blessed, and at times intellectually and socially hindered by the availability of food in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the time period with which this volume of *A Cultural History of Food* is concerned.

Until the last couple of decades many in academia did not view food as a fitting topic in its own right. Prior to this current popularity there were earlier academic studies of food, originating mainly in anthropology, folklore, and the *Annales* school, which regarded the study of food as key to understanding cultures and societies, and individuals' lives within them. Food did not fit a traditional standard of worthiness in most traditional academic disciplines. It was not seen and understood in political or intellectual terms, nor was it analyzed aesthetically. And when considered at all, food was often regarded as quotidian, seemingly mundane, and decidedly female. Frequently, food was employed as an indistinctive backdrop through which to study, for example, labor relations (workers in canning factories and slaughter houses), agrarian political movements (New Deal-era food production), or twentieth-century industrialization (the rise of food-processing conglomerates). However, as social and cultural history combined to explore the intersection of everyday life, especially the experiences of women and minorities, with the consumption of all manner of objects, many more topics were deemed worthy of scholarly inquiry, including food. Eating, after all, is much more than ingesting nutrients for biological survival: food plays a significant role in social relationships, is a highly symbolic element in religious and magical rites, aids in developing and maintaining cultural distinctions, and assumes enormous significance in shaping individual identities.

After all, not only does everyone have to eat (and ideally several times daily) to survive, but also all the great civilizations, both ancient and modern, meticulously recorded by historians and philosophers, have essentially

risen and fallen according to rulers' abilities to feed their constituents successfully. The salience of recent debates concerning food safety, global environmentalism, and the effect of food production on indigenous peoples and cultures worldwide, and the renewed interest in high-quality, minimally processed food, culinary tourism and fine dining, combined with ever-rising rates of obesity and its adverse consequences, gives this history of food in the modern era rich potential.

This volume examines food from 1920 to the beginning of the twenty-first century: what was produced, processed, distributed, and consumed, under what circumstances and to what end, and how these foods changed over time within a larger framework of society, politics, economics, culture, and important events. Further, it will use the production and consumption of food as a lens to examine the effects of such watershed events as the devastating First and Second World Wars; the emergence of the United States and the Soviet Union as world superpowers; population booms and the shifting landscapes as cities shrank and swelled again with new immigrants; struggles for independence, civil rights, and democracy; and the uncertainty but also creativity of the so-called post-industrial, post-Cold War era of globalization.

### A BRIEF SURVEY OF MAJOR EVENTS

It is virtually impossible to summarize accurately the history of the modern era around the globe, and do justice to every nation, every group of people, and every key event across continents—attempting to do so would result more in a list of events than an exploration and interpretation of the role of food in modern history. Despite the challenges, however, it is important and useful to at least point to key events, as the modern era is replete with transformative developments that directly affect the production and consumption of food. To begin, think of the dramatic changes that occurred between the beginning and the end of the twentieth century. Those born in the 1920s whose lives spanned much of the century entered into a markedly different society than the one in which they left. In the 1920s, for example, most farms were devoid of electricity and indoor plumbing, and airplane and automobile travel was unthinkable for most people. By the early twenty-first century, the world was a dramatically

different place. Modes of communication evolved from the radio to the telephone, television, and satellites. Computers and digital media were an integral part of late-twentieth-century society and have continued to rapidly evolve. Technology, as applied to industrialization and mass production of goods, similarly fostered dramatic changes in people's lives. While industrialization and mass production of goods had begun prior to the modern period, they continued to make dramatic inroads with regard to all-important aspects of life, particularly food production and processing. Industrial processing, the development of plastics, artificial fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides, and refrigeration, for example, all had dramatic effects on food, culture, and society.

The modern era also experienced dramatic development and change with regard to political and social institutions, systems of government, and social movements, including the demise or continuation of colonialism, democracy, fascism, and communism. *De jure* colonialist regimes were replaced with *de facto* colonialism, despots, and corruption. Both the West and East conducted their own evil actions: Jim Crow segregation and other indignities in the United States, the European Holocaust, as well as Japanese domination and cruel treatment of those in other Asian countries. Yet struggling independent nations also emerged during this period. Post-colonial independence in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, India/Pakistan, the formation of the state of Israel and its ensuing Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the emergence of the European Union—all took their place on the world political stage. Much of the emergence of more democratic states was a result of those protesting and fighting for equality and human rights: Mohatmas Ghandi, Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King Jr. All took place against the terrible backdrop of global and regional warfare in the modern era: World War II, the Cold War, the American wars in Asia (Korea, Vietnam) and the Middle East (the Gulf Wars), hot and cold wars all over the globe, between industrialized nations, between developing nations, between the mighty (United States, Soviet Union) and the meager who wore down and outlasted the superpowers (the Soviet Union and Afghanistan, American wars in Asia and the Middle East). Further, growing impatience with totalitarianism led to counter-culture protests around the world, in Europe, the Baltic countries, the United States, China (Tiananmen Square), and most recently the 2011 social and political protest movements across the Arab world.

## THE 1920s THROUGH POST-WORLD WAR II

The early period, the 1920s through to World War II, for many were decades of dark, looming uncertainty and destruction. A significant portion of the globe emerged from the Great War battered and despondent, if not devastated by the unprecedented scale of death and destruction. Irish poet William Butler Yeats' famous lines, penned in 1919, embodied an era's pessimism. "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold/Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,/The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere/The ceremony of innocence is drowned;/The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity."<sup>1</sup>

The war ushered in economic booms and busts, leading to a sustained global depression in the 1930s. The power vacuums left by the Great War led to totalitarian dictators (Tojo, Hitler, Mussolini, Franco) who quickly capitalized on the political instability to rise to power, control society, and eventually bring the globe to the brink of disaster with World War II. Avant-garde art, philosophy, literature, and film all embodied a pessimism and disillusionment.

In this era there emerged a noticeable shift in food and consumption habits. The industrialization of the food supply allowed greater variation in people's diets and their nutrition subsequently improved, though it can be argued that canned goods and other processed foods diminished taste and nutrients, leading to acclimation to salt and sugar in heavy quantities. To sell these mass-produced items the early twentieth century witnessed the proliferation of communications firms creating increasingly sophisticated advertising. The increased number and circulation of magazines and newspapers, and the growth in population and literacy rates ensured audiences for corporate advertising.<sup>2</sup>

After the worldwide depression of the 1930s, and the destruction from yet another, even more wide-spread and destructive world war, the United States was one of the few to emerge from World War II with its industries and economy thriving, signaling the arrival of what *Time* publisher Henry Luce deemed the American Century. The war had changed, accelerated, and altered the production, manufacturing, and advertising of industrialized food, setting the stage for the remainder of the century. During the war North American farmers, with fewer workers, had managed to produce

food at record-breaking levels, in part because of the liberal use of manufactured fertilizers and pesticides, including the new miracle insect killer DDT. After the war the continued reliance, and increased use, of such elements combined with more and more sophisticated farm equipment and hybrid seeds led to even greater production (much of which was subsidized by long-held government parity agreements).

After the war U.S. farmers, agriculture scientists, and politicians turned their attention to providing adequate food for the postwar world, ultimately through famine relief and crop production. Surplus food purchased by the government was sent abroad to help alleviate and temper the global famine conditions wrought by drought and wartime destruction. United States' aid under the auspices of the Marshall Plan pumped in some \$12.5 billion to rebuild European economies and infrastructure, with several billions going to Asia, particularly Japan, as well. Still, to help answer the demands of the rapidly growing global population, Rockefeller Foundation scientists engineered new seeds designed to produce significantly more grain in countries all over the world, and ushered in what was christened the Green Revolution (discussed in detail in chapter 1). The Green Revolution seemed to work miracles, vastly increasing the amount of food available to developing countries. Yet it also put a severe strain on local economies, endangered subsistence farmers, the environment, and even indigenous cultures, and accelerated the advance toward large, corporate-type farming in the United States and elsewhere.

As in farm production, World War II provided the catalyst for the postwar boom in food processing. Military quartermaster departments pounded, dried, stretched, and shrunk food in every imaginable way in order to reduce their bulk and weight to ship them overseas efficiently and in large quantities. Frozen orange juice, instant coffee and cocoa, cake mixes, brown-and-serve rolls, dehydrated soups in little plastic bags, instant potatoes, powdered eggs and milk, ready trimmed and packaged meats, and even the ubiquitous TV dinner all either got their start, or were perfected with wartime research and technology. After the war the food industry quickly adopted the knowledge and technology and began producing food items for domestic consumers. Advertisers and enthusiastic journalists deemed the new preservation techniques "a modern miracle in the kitchen."<sup>3</sup> The technology so pervasively permeated the global food



supply that eventually high-quality food became synonymous with food capable of a long shelf life and low spoilage. Some of these new food products made their way more quickly into homes than others, of course.

Commercial canning and bottling—well established by the early 1920s and rationed during the war—reached a golden age in the 1950s as new materials, new methods, proliferation of products, and a larger percentage of household budget went to processed foods. Consumers' use in particular of canned foods kept increasing through the postwar years because of their convenience and their ability to remain stable for several years. In many rural areas still lacking in refrigeration and electricity, canned foods were integral to rural long-term food supply.

As food production increased and food costs declined, consumption of food in general went up. The new processing techniques resulted in a phenomenal increase in the number of food products available to consumers, and a corresponding expansion and alteration of grocery stores to accommodate them. Subtly at first, and more dramatically later, there occurred a shift in the seasonal manner of eating experienced by those in developed countries. The increased number of freezers in homes, for example, allowed for the purchase of more frozen items, and also allowed women to buy large quantities of fresh produce and freeze it for later consumption. Further, faster, more efficient methods of shipping (especially reliance on air cargo) allowed fresh fruit and vegetables to be more widely available year round. Similarly, fresh seafood was more frequently available in the land-locked regions.<sup>4</sup>

To keep up with the overwhelming number of new food products, grocery stores also underwent a radical transformation in the postwar era. In the early part of the century most grocery stores were small corner shops, with the grocer standing behind the counter to retrieve items at a shopper's request. Between 1890 and 1950, however, grocery stores became larger and were often supplied by a central warehouse. Chain grocery stores rapidly proliferated, introducing branded food products to consumers. Thus while larger, self-serve supermarkets existed before the war, specifically the A&P, Piggly-Wiggly, and Tesco chains, after World War II they became a permanent fixture on the landscape, eventually swallowing the older style grocery store, as well as contributing to the decline in such specialty stores as butchers, fresh-fruit markets, and bakeries. Supermarkets, as the