

The Palate of Nations

Diane Purkiss

Fellow and Tutor of Keble College, Oxford
Professor of English Literature,
University of Oxford

ALL INDIVIDUALS HAVE THEIR own food history; the fish and chips eaten in the rain on a Saturday night, the toast soldiers and soft-boiled egg that was supposed to be a cure for any human illness, the birthday cake shaped like Buzz Lightyear... And all such individual food histories are known to be part of larger food histories; the fish and chips understood as a traditional part of a seaside holiday, the soft-boiled egg the kind only grandma could make from an egg from her own hens, the birthday cake that had to be capable of impressing those who had previously eaten similarly shaped cakes. However little we control, food is an area where we can exercise our wills and our desires, and also grab a little piece of our family history, our ethnic history, our planetary history.

Yet the notion that we choose what we eat freely is probably an illusion. The poor have never eaten well, having little choice but to devour food contaminated either with bacteria or with ingredients designed to increase the profits of those who made it, and the reason more people are eating badly now is rising poverty levels. All that has changed in the developed world is that the

poor can now meet their daily calorie needs, though doing so usually involves not meeting other nutritional goals. And yet writers like Stephen Le and Michael Pollan still write of a world in which everybody ate like an Italian urban bourgeois gentleman. This never happened. During most of the past, the poor lurched from a diet in which they did not get enough fat or protein to one in which they got plenty of fat and plenty of calories, but not enough protein and far too much simple sugar. Even today, poor people can still dance from one such diet to another. Many reading this might say that it's cheaper to buy green beans than cookies; true, but even a pound of green beans will not meet daily calorie needs, and green beans cannot be eaten raw in vast quantities. They require a saucepan and heat source in order that the nutrients they provide can be adequately accessed. They require time. They require planning. Cookies are a convenience food; a pound of cookies will provide more than the calorie needs of an individual, and will provide them straightaway, without additional equipment or preparation. The poor are not stupid; they are making choices. Le's way of thinking has a long and tragic history. Just before the First World War, many kindly women did their best to get the English poor to prepare porridge instead of relying on bread. The problem was that the poor lacked a reliable heat source, a large saucepan, and the time required to watch the porridge boil; they also lacked milk, butter, cream, and sugar to make it palatable. One woman's husband told her that if she served him that slop again, he would throw it at her.

Like Michael Pollan, Le offers a series of rules based on evolutionary biology. These are devoid of surprises: keep moving, don't sit around watching television, eat less meat and dairy when young, eat "traditional" cuisine, by which he turns out to mean the

Mediterranean diet, and also American southern, Japanese, or Australian aboriginal. Eat sustainably and get safe germ and parasite exposure, while cooking your food at low heat and thus avoiding the tasty, crispy markers of caramelization. Avoid Parmesan, too, and pancakes, and waffles, and cookies, and doughnuts, hamburgers and soft drinks. No bacon. No sautéed tofu. But remember, fad diets don't work – except the fad that is being promulgated here.

books, and perhaps older. As Ken Albala revealed many years ago, Renaissance thinkers were also plagued by dietary advice; warm and bitter foods were vital for sexual prowess, while cucumbers would have a disastrously depressing effect on male libido. We laugh now, but there's every chance that in 500 years people will find our dietary rules just as comical. Moreover, there has never been much evidence that human beings do choose their foods as if

Writers still write of a world in which everybody ate like an Italian urban bourgeois gentleman. This never happened.

It's probably no coincidence that these rules ensure that the relishes the poor use to liven up carbohydrates are the very things stigmatized as bad. It was ever thus; William Cobbett railed against tea as a wasteful sign of bad housekeeping. Le does acknowledge that his own brown rice diet in postgraduate days made him feel ill, but neglects to mention that it too was once seen as a cure for all ills. The trouble is that when you read the text it turns out that these rules are based on a series of theories about human evolution and biology, rather than certainties. Do we really have to eat acorns just because our ancestors did, given how difficult it is to prepare them? Do we have to eat durian, or should we in fact avoid them because they contain tryptophan – or should we note that turkey meat contains tryptophan, and is easier to produce and import than the durian? Are humans really hardwired to crave meat? If so, how can we explain the rise of vegetarianism and veganism in the past 50 years? And do these really endanger male reproductivity?

The underlying problem here is the assumption that our food choices are or should be dictated by health concerns. To be sure, this notion is as old as printed

they were patented medicines. Instead, most of us choose food from a repertoire made familiar to us through upbringing, and also choose novelties that we hope will give us pleasant surprises. It is unlikely that many people buying a box of doughnuts are under any illusion that this product is healthy. Telling them that it is not healthy is therefore very unlikely to change their behavior. One reason why such advice on its own seldom works is that evolution actually tells us that sugar is good for us.

An alternative kind of food culture is offered by *The Potlikker Papers*, in which the last 60 years of southern food are traced to the many ethnicities that contributed to them. Potlikker (“pot liquor”) is the water left in part after greens or beans have been boiled in it. Science has caught up with folk wisdom, and it's now well understood that the vitamins and minerals are most likely in the water, not in the solids. The author is in charge of the Southern Foodways Alliance, which magisterially seeks to advance the claims of southern food as a properly American cuisine, crafted from local and authentic materials, a rival to Milan. John T. Edge shows that conversations about food offer ways to grasp the bigger truths about

race and identity in the south. A particular highlight is his account of Georgia Gilmore, an unsung heroine of the Civil Rights movement, who baked cakes to raise money for the bus protests, baked goods that embodied freedom. Elsewhere, he points out that the association between black slave women and food was far from freeing. Black cooks were meant to work for love, including love of their white charges. They did indeed work for love; not love of white children, but of their own families.

This is really a book about race. When we get Dylan Roof and Paula Deen on the same page, we get it. (You can't go wrong in gourmet circles giving Paula Deen a poke in the eye. You can't go wrong in antiracist circles, either. She is a soft target, in every respect.) Many of Deen's dishes were really the creations of uncredited black cooks, Edge explains. Black men and women made food under economic duress even in the 21st century, in chicken houses and on killing floors. In the tomato fields of Florida, yearly wages were as low as \$17,000, while a gourmet food culture was developing and mom-and-pop restaurants were disappearing in favour of white tablecloth versions of spruced-up traditional southern foods. The inequalities became more rather than less savage. The same effect is visible from Sean Brock's cookbook *Heritage*. Cosily headlining one recipe "My sister's chocolate éclair cake", Brock announces "the version I grew up on included store bought Graham crackers, Jell-O pudding mix, and Cool Whip... My version uses Anson Mills Graham flour and homemade vanilla pudding and whipped cream." Of course it does. The interesting question might be which is heritage? And for whom? As a Brit, I once hurt an American friend's feelings by saying that I loved the American culture of biscuits and chocolate gravy, and twenty foot tall concrete hotdog models. Clearly, I was meant to love Anson Mills

Graham flour, and authenticate it as a proper European. But as a proper European, I'm wildly addicted to Biscoff spread and Hershey's butterscotch chips.

David Downie's *A Taste of Paris* overtly markets the American Paris story as a love affair with authenticity not usual in the United States. There is never any end to [this] Paris, as Hemingway almost said. But then things have declined, as they always have. Even Hemingway struggled to find the real Paris. In his first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway wrote "we ate dinner at Madame Lecomte's restaurant on the far side of the island. It was crowded with Americans and we had to stand up and wait for a place. Some one had put it in the American Women's Club list as a quaint restaurant on the Paris quais as yet untouched by Americans, so we had to wait forty-five minutes for a table." So clearly we need Downie's help, or maybe the help of Patricia Wells or David Lebovitz or some memory of Hemingway eating oysters at Brasserie Lipp, but not actually Lipp now because it's a chain. What won me over to Paris – and Downie too, it seems – was the stubborn particularity of bistros like Ambassade d'Auvergne alongside the Gault-Millau 19-rated gourmet temples, like Alain Ducasse. Downie wants to know what it is Paris's history that allows it to be a temple of remarkable food to this day. He probably doesn't want to be told that it is the American Women's Club list.

He leaves few stones unturned; the book is a rollicking tour of the history of Paris from the Parisii and their Roman conquerors through trend-setting French monarchs like Marie de Medici and Louis XIV, and also looks at nineteenth-century gastronomy through the writings of Brillat-Savarin, Curnonsky and Careme. He is oddly concerned with the history of the food of the great, the 1%, when it's actually the food of ordinary people that he loves.

Careme is the very last person to explain why *blanquette de veau* is such an iconic dish in the bistros he adores. When he does find real bistros, he is chagrined to discover that they are full of Americans, who are also seeking the real Paris. Where are the Parisians? They are probably eating Moroccan or Vietnamese food rather than the bistro food that they could make at home. As always, the young are to blame somehow; Downie doesn't talk to many young, but my daughter's friend, a girl who attends a high school in the 5th *arrondissement*, says Parisians are still fanatic about good food, but much more interested in other ethnicities than in their own. (Just like Americans, in fact.) This continues an older pattern. Not long ago, everyone in Paris saw him- or herself as an immigrant from deep France. Immigrants from Normandy and Lyons and Nimes brought their own foodways, and these were reinforced by the traditional Parisian trips back to deep France each year. Even inside the French gourmet tradition, deep France is a felt presence. At Michel Bras' restaurant in Aubrac, the *aligot* was made by his mother, then in her 80s. French haute cuisine is a crown atop a real princess. Parisians are also much more ferociously local than the tourists. On the Ile Saint Louis, there is a baker at each end of the island, and nobody ever dreamt of going somewhere other than their nearest. Why would you? It is this that keeps the food culture alive, the expectation that you are known, that you say *bonjour monsieur* on entry, and then greet the other customers. Roaming among the Roman masonry, Downie learns less than he might by standing in a local bakery for an hour talking to the baker about how and why good bread returned because an American called Steven Kaplan made it so. But Downie knows some things I don't. Next time I'm in the city of light, I'm off to St

Eustache to see the charcuterie chapel.

Individuals as well as cities develop their own personal food cultures, and like cities, may move through different food cultures in a lifetime. Laura Shapiro investigates six women, showing just how upsetting individuated food can be. In theory, women own and control food, but in practice, their relationship with it is often difficult. Take Dorothy Wordsworth, the slender nature writer, who somehow became an obese and angry elderly woman. Dorothy moved from seeing food as something she prepared for others to a passionate greed for porridge. Often enough, food becomes a weapon in war between men and women, as it was in the Roosevelt White House. What better revenge could there be than constant servings of "Mexican eggs" – eggs on bananas atop cooked rice – to a wheelchair-bound man unable in those times to eat out? There was the shame, too, served up with the Mexican eggs. Understandably, guests complained, or left their food untouched. Eleanor's weapon in this war was the housekeeper, Mrs Nesbitt, punishing everyone with dried meat, cold gravy, and endless leftovers with white sauce, sometimes served on toast. Even that sounds wonderful once we have met Helen Gurley Brown, at war not with her family but with herself. "Dessert every night is that whole package of sugar-free diet Jell-O in one dish, with a dollop of peach, lemon, strawberry, or whatever, Dannon light yoghurt on top. 50 cal – heaven". When asked for a statement about feminism by Gloria Steinem, Helen tried her best: "I'm skinny!" she exclaimed.

Shapiro shows that food is about power, so it's interesting that Hitler and Lenin had a food taste in common: apple cake. In Anna von Bremzen's fascinating and terrifying parody of Julia Child's masterpiece, *Mastering the art of Soviet Cookery*, food involves a series of compromises between hunger and

the crushing dead hand of Soviet policy, in which food had to be utilitarian, mere fuel, bread alone - with one ounce of bread a day for the bourgeoisie. Like Hitler, Lenin paraded his own moderation, supposedly content with stale bread and weak tea, but his policies meant the loss of an entire food culture. Bourgeois chefs were replaced with people who could not cook at all. The Bolsheviks were urban, clueless about peasant realities, but they were good at making off with grain supplies and blaming their thefts on “greedy” peasants. They invented an entire class of tight-fisted peasants who could bear the brunt of official and popular disapproval, and named them *kulaks*.

The new regime branded the domestic kitchen reactionary. To eat as a family was “scientifically unsound.” The daft policies weren’t even efficient, except at killing. 5 million people died in the famine of 1921, and worse was to come when a young Stalin launched his Five Year Plan for industrialisation. Collectivization was unleashed, and peasants were forced onto giant farms, which were meant to feed the new industrial proletariat. The farms were bitterly inefficient. The peasants fled to the towns in desperate search for food. By 1933, the Ukraine was in the grip of the worst man-made famine in history, causing the deaths of 7 million people. There’s now a word for it; the *Holodomor*. As desperate peasants tried to flee, government officials robbed their houses. The book kills appetite stone dead even while it rejoices in the absurdity and craziness of the people’s creative ripostes. The best story is the one about the state *kobhka*, supposedly a Russian indigenous delicacy, but actually an imported frozen burger fried in oil, or the Eskimo pie, introduced as a Soviet creation, or German sausages rebranded as Soviet sausages, and, most incredible of all, Soviet *kornfleks*. Most of these were the creation of

one Armenian businessman, a warm man whose sole failure was an effort to introduce a spicy aromatic condiment – ketchup – that could be kept in a home refrigerator. Stalin did not want people to buy refrigerators.

The Russians were to suffer even more when the Nazis invaded in 1941. The war in Leningrad made even pre-war conditions seem not too bad. Starving people ate bookbinding glue and the soil around sugar warehouses because it was sweet. To this city, von Bremzen’s mother travelled to find her husband; for the rest of her life, she would eat like a starving wolf. All Russia got to know new kinds of food. *Balanda* was soup thickened with a handful of millet and flavoured with a horse bone. *Khleb* was a clay-like bread made from rye mixed with linseed cakes and sawdust. Tins of American pork were greeted like ambrosia. Soviet food policy was a failure in every way possible. It wasn’t even successful in eradicating hierarchy; candies – cheap and nasty – became an incurable sign of status in a world where nothing tasted good. Gorbachev’s efforts to discourage Russian vodka drinking struck similar snags in male enthusiasm and bonding. It’s precisely when the cupboard is bare that everything that’s left assumes vast importance.

What a relief to turn from the nightmare of Soviet cooking to the glorious thirteenth-century Syrian cookbook lovingly edited by Charles Perry. Post-classical cookbooks were first seen in Arab speaking lands in the tenth century. This one is not just a cookbook, but a meticulous record of meals consumed and rare ingredients imported: apricots, rose, clove, saffron, ambergris, quinces, barberries and tamarind; the names roll on like heady scents. There’s so much to know and to savour, from the familiar *sambusak* pastries to the extraordinary recipe for a rotisserie chicken allowed to drip its juices onto a flat bread. But nowadays, I look sadly at my tin of Aleppo spice because the souk where the

ingredients were bought is ash. Nobody knows who wrote the thirteenth century cookbook, but a good answer might be that it took a whole culture to create, though von Bremzen might remind us that such towering achievements can be sabotaged by really determined persecutions. We know how much the Syrians too have had to improvise of late. We don't know yet how many of them have died.

When a food culture has been taken from us, we can easily grow misty about its assembled integers. In her remarkable and searing *The Hungry Empire*, Lizzie Collingham reminds us of why this might be a mistake. For Collingham, the British Empire was a headlong hunting expedition, unsophisticated and primal. The British, like the Syrians, began by searching for spices, but there the resemblance ends. The Brits could not find the right routes through the oceans because the world was far bigger than they thought it was; instead, they stumbled across the Grand Banks, and then the coast of Massachusetts, and then the West Indies, gradually creating an empire made of sugar, cod, and eventually other shipped goods including tea and also grain from the American wheat belt. The national way of eating in Britain was made of the foods of others. In practice, what this meant was that the Kenyans were growing cash crops and not the food they themselves needed. When the Empire recognised this, they insisted that famine was simply normal for the primitive peoples they had colonised. The Bengal famine of 1943, in which Churchill left the Bengalis to starve, exemplified the policy that the British must be fed first. When Bisewar Chakrabati visited his home village in the Ganges Delta in 1943, the whole population seemed to be "moving silently towards death." In response, the government began rounding up the starving in Calcutta so that they could die out of sight in specialised camps,

in an uncanny parallel to what other regimes were doing in Europe at the time. The poor in Bengal, in the Gambia, and across the Empire had given their food reserves to the mother country, which was to boast earsplittingly thereafter that it had stood alone against tyranny. The Empire's role in providing the British with cheap luxuries had a body count well before the Bengal famine, as Erika Rappaport's book *A Thirst for Empire* shows. Focusing solely on tea, and the use of profits from it to fund wars and fuel colonization, she also shows how the picture was completed by the promulgation of this innocuous drink as the natural beverage of English families. The British were seduced into giving passionate allegiance to a beverage made from a plant that could only grow in a climate completely unlike their own. Relentless marketing linked it to home, femininity, purity. Its image could also be spruced up to create a link to leisure and elegance. Its popularity is at last beginning to decline, though the tea plantations the British created are now sustained by demand from Indians, who under the Empire could not afford it.

All this is immensely informative, but it does rather take the pleasure out of breakfast, lunch and dinner. Every story of food becomes a story of slavery, exploitation, famine, mass murder. This is entirely true, and it needs saying. But what are we to do? We have to go on eating. We cannot give up food as we might smoking. What can we eat without self-reproach? What can we drink without harm? While there are many experts eager to give us an answer based on health, what kind of answer can we give based on history?

I'm off to have lunch. Toasted home-made sourdough; Eric Kayser's recipe, flour from a local mill; English butter and Australian Vegemite. German silken tofu and yoghurt, flavoured with Nielsen Massey

Madagascan vanilla, now ridiculously expensive because Hersheys have begun using it, so combined with Seville orange juice and sucralose sweetener, topped with a sprinkling of home-made granola, made with honey and brown sugar and almonds and pumpkin seeds. It doesn't fit any food culture except my own. I don't think anybody else must eat this way or that it's a better way to eat. It's just what I happen to like. Ultimately, history leads us to taste and taste until we find what we love. A

Anya von Bremzen, *Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking: A Memoir of Food and Longing* (Broadway Books, 368pp., \$16 paper)

Lizzie Collingham, *The Taste of Empire: How Britain's Quest for Food Shaped the Modern World* (Basic Books, 408pp., \$32 cloth)

David Downie, *A Taste of Paris: A History of the Parisian Love Affair with Food* (St. Martin's Press, 304pp., \$27 cloth)

John T. Edge, *The Potlikker Papers: A Food History of the Modern South* (Penguin, 384pp., \$17 paper)

Stephen Le, *100 Million Years of Food: What Our Ancestors Ate and Why It Matters Today* (Picador, 320pp., \$18 paper)

Erika Rappaport, *A Thirst for Empire: How Tea Shaped the Modern World* (Princeton University Press, 568pp., \$40 cloth)

Scents and Flavors: A Syrian Cookbook, ed. and trans. Charles Perry (NYU Press, 352pp., \$30 cloth)

Laura Shapiro, *What She Ate: Six Remarkable Women and the Food That Tells Their Stories* (Viking, 320pp., \$27 cloth)

The Palace of Nations hosts a range of exhibitions in an 800-squared-metre gallery in the United Nations Palace in Geneva. Related. Gombrowicz's Shakespeare Parody to Premiere in Moscow. Grzegorz Jarzyna is directing Yvonne, Princess of Burgundy at the State Theatre of Nations in Moscow. This will be the first collaboration between the Polish director and Russian actors. Go to the #performing arts topic page Go to the #culture topic page. Ludwik Rajchman " Doctor without Borders. Fantastic doctor, a fierce revolutionary, an earnest anti-fascist and a champion for children's health around