Refined Tastes: Sugar, Confectionery, and Consumers in Nineteenth-Century America  
Wendy A. Woloson  
Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002  
xi + 277 pp. Illustrations. $44.95 (cloth)

In this study, Wendy A. Woloson argues that as sugar itself became more refined during the nineteenth century, so did attitudes towards it. The background is one of increased availability, as North America became less reliant on European-owned sugar islands in the Caribbean, and sugar refining developed into an industrial process. Woloson’s first thirty pages outline the early modern history of sugar; this introductory material is hard going in places, and it is sometimes difficult to follow the threads. Persevere, or go back after reading the rest. The main part of the book, a fascinating dissection of themes relating to the democratization of sugar and confectionery in American culture from about 1790 to 1910, is more rewarding. Alone, sugar makes penny candies, attractive to children; with the help of ice, it is the foundation for ice cream and iced sodas, refreshing during summer heat; together with chocolate, it becomes fine bonbons, promoted as courting gifts. Other chapters examine ornamental icing and sugar work as an expression of status, particularly at weddings, and confectionery making in a domestic context. Recipes and manuals of housekeeping and deportment, plus ideas from social theorists, are supplemented with illustrations from contemporary sources such as advertisements and trade cards.

This forms a backdrop for a second, and for the writer, more intriguing theme, that of feminization: “As a rarity, sugar signified male economic prowess in America. As it became cheaper and more prolific, however, it became linked with femininity: its economic devaluation coincided with its cultural demotion” (p.3). The gender argument is not always clear, and the idea of sugar starting out as “masculine” seems to be an assumption. Ideas relating to sugar alone, as an ingredient of confectionery, and the abstract notion of sweetness in language are used to back up the discussion, but there are problems, including the intrusion of technology (defined as male) into the female domestic sphere. That confectionery was heavily promoted to children and women is well demonstrated, but how do we know that men did not also eat confections? Surely they shared in desserts and canned fruits? A glance at alcohol might have been interesting. Did American men drink sweet punches, as Englishmen did in the early nineteenth century? And what about chewing gum, developed in the 1890s?

Some sugar work does show links with femininity—for instance the white wedding cake, discussed at length—but the idea is a complex one, and I am not totally convinced by the evidence presented; perhaps because the case for sugar being masculine in earlier centuries is, as the author admits, not all that clear. Assumptions to do with time, place, and income group also lead to disconcerting shifts. It seems that middle-class life in the eastern states during the late nineteenth century is what is really under the microscope. Discussion is marred occasionally by shaky detail: for instance, sugar was exported to Europe in semi-refined form, not cane (as implied on pp. 21, 26) or juice (p.27). This is a shame, because it is obvious that the author has researched the subject deeply. Part of Woloson’s argument hinges on the conflation of sweetness with feminine qualities, and she comments on how much more could be done on this lexicographical line of research. And observations about perceptions of candy consumption and female gluttony still resonate loudly.

What emerges is a view of sweetness and confectionery at one particular time in one particular culture. It shows how the accumulation of ideas about sugar, which developed over centuries in Europe, were telescoped into the space of a few decades across the Atlantic. We now know that sugar is “a nonessential good with little nutritional value” (p.12), but nineteenth-century North Americans would, surely, be influenced by the aspirations it held for their European ancestors. Abundant sugar was imposed on a post-colonial, newly industrialized society. Did that society develop new ideas, pick up on ones current in the Western world generally, or was it that the ancient and deep fascination that sugar held for their European ancestors welled up in this new context, in a short time span? All three, perhaps. The terrifying consumption figures for sugar and artificial sweeteners cited in the postscript show both that the North American desire for sweetness continues, and that whatever the flaws and unanswered questions, Woloson has a subject worthy of consideration.

—Laura Mason, author, Sugar-Plums and Sherbet

Matters of Taste: Food & Drink in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and Life  
Donna R. Barnes and Peter G. Rose  
Essays by Charles T. Gehring and Nancy T. Minty  
Albany and Syracuse, NY: Albany Institute of History & Art and Syracuse University Press, 2002  
162 pp. Color plates. Recipe booklet. $49.95 (paper)

What are we looking for in Dutch art? The dewdrop on a freshly gathered cherry? The imagined crunch of a freshly-
baked pretzel? The awful stab of recognition that a wickedly observed dysfunctional family is the mirror image of our own? The wild weather at sea that will wipe out the family fortune, or the freshly landed catch of herring sitting placidly on the beach, which will guarantee survival after the storm?

Food historians pillage art and literature for information often involuntarily supplied by artists with aims other than providing us with gastronomic insights. And we sometimes jump to naive conclusions, particularly when the food portrayed is heavy with symbolism. The hothouse grapes that grace every vegetable stall in the land were a luxury crop, not everyday fare, but they hang on in there because they can be interpreted as symbols of such things as virginity in a modest market maiden, or fruitfulness in marriage for the plump matron buying her child an apple (itself a symbol of many things), or sacramental wine, or the vineyard of the Lord, or libidinous merrymaking. This merry game of hunting the symbol can sometimes turn rather sour, with warring schools of interpretation slogging it out in print, distancing us from the innocent instinctive pleasure we feel in the debit rendering of agreeable objects.

In her introduction, Donna R. Barnes negotiates an elegant path through this minefield, with a succinct overview of the different approaches. Painters may have simply described and recorded everyday scenes and objects, or they may have introduced items with several layers of symbolic meaning that could be deployed to ram home the moral messages also found in illustrated books of sayings and proverbs, sermons, and guides to good conduct. So the eye of the beholder can focus with innocence or great erudition, and guided by Barnes, gain pleasure and delight from both this book and the exhibition of which it is the catalogue.

The catalogue notes, which begin with a clear description of each painting, continue with helpful background information about the work and a summary of the possible different interpretations of the foodstuffs and objects represented, often presented as questions, leaving viewers to come to their own conclusions.

On the same page, food historian Peter G. Rose contributes further insights, with her commentaries on each painting, linking the cuisine of seventeenth-century Holland to developments in the New World, and giving us the opportunity to sample her adaptations of historic recipes in a very helpful accompanying booklet. This catalogue must be among the first publications to acknowledge the importance of food history in the interpretation of paintings, showing how a hands-on investigation of ingredients and cooking methods makes it possible to amplify our interpretation of works of art.

Item 10, a still life by Maerten Boelma from the 1650s, depicts a cooked ham, a glass of beer, a roemer of wine, bread, and mustard:

The cloves in this ham cast a shadow on the fat, and perhaps make some viewers’ mouths anticipate the spicy taste. For others, the cloves might symbolize the nails used during Christ’s Crucifixion, as the Dutch word nagel is used both for cloves and nails. Viewers who preferred the religious import might have associated the bread roll and roemer of wine with the Eucharist. (p. 48)

The copious, creamy white fat and the rosy meat of a partly consumed ham indicate a certain level of prosperity, for a lot of capital is locked up in that lump of carefully preserved flesh, which although presented as a little snack, a hammetje, also speaks a conscious pride in the affluence it proclaims. The cloves have been stuck into the fat after cooking, when the protective skin, hard and inedible after the salting and smoking, has been peeled aside. As well as adding flavor they would have been preservative and helped to discourage insects. We can see in another “hamscape” by Gerret Willemz. Heda how the ham is carved into bite-sized gobbets rather than whole slices, ideal finger food for an elegant little onbijtje.

Item 25 is a still life by Jan Davidsz. de Heem, a sumptuous arrangement of good things—oysters, bread, grapes, and an orange, on a ledge partly covered by some rich blue silk. A roemer of wine contains a partly peeled orange and is decked with bay and blue and red flowers. The commentary is stimulating:

Did the lemon peel remind viewers to temper or moderate pleasure, like citrus cuts the flavor of sweet wine? Did the contrasting colors of the knife recall the allegory of good and evil? Perhaps the aphrodisiacal oysters and smoldering wick hinted at transient desires, while the bread and wine referred to Holy Communion. Might some think that the orange represented the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden and the salamander the tempting serpent? Or has the painter invited viewers to contemplate his skills in capturing the gritty layered texture of the shells, the scaly crust of the rolls, and the dimpled waxy skin of the Seville orange? (p. 78)

Peter Rose offers illuminating references to oranges in New Holland, and a tasty recipe from De Verstandige Kock, a contemporary Dutch cookbook, which flavors meatballs with orange zest, pepper, mace, and nutmeg. Citrus fruits were either expensive imports or equally expensive hothouse fruits, available only to the rich. We know that a much wider variety of citrus was available then, and that bitter
oranges were used as we would use lemon juice with fish and oysters, and that the peel, apart from being candied, could be a flavoring for wine of various kinds. A young woman in Pieter de Hooch’s A Musical Party in a Courtyard, in the National Gallery in London, stirs the contents of a wineglass with a knife perfumed by essential oils from the zest of an orange she has just peeled. Here is a token of refined leisure rather than a peg on which to hang a sermon.

Pies were a whole load of fun for the sententious moralist. Food enclosed in a solid pastry crust kept much better than if transported raw, or when cooked in other ways. The exquisite contents were protected from corruption by the hard, inedible casing, but once broached, and the filling exposed to the world of decay and sin, the rot would set in. One can go on to compare this with the sober exterior of a Dutch merchant’s house, with his rich possessions concealed within, including his plainly dressed wife, whose voluptuous charms were likewise hidden from the world. But the pie in Item 30, a still life by Roelof Koets, displayed alongside hot-house fruits in a costly porcelain bowl, a goblet of wine perched on a gilt stand incorporating a corpulent Bacchus, and precious silverware, is part of a cheering display of conspicuous consumption, which although full of potential moralistic symbols, proclaims pride and pleasure in the wealth that could afford such a richly stuffed comestible. It is probable that this pie was in the great medieval tradition still favored by the contemporary English cook Robert May, in whose recipes dried fruit, prunes, dates, pine kernels, suet, chopped-up meat, artichoke hearts, chestnuts, mushrooms, sweetbreads, coxcombs, and sliced lemons snuggle up together in a profusion of spices, sugar, egg yolks, and wine.

Early American collectors appreciated the art of the Netherlands, with its apparent emphasis on the virtues of sobriety and hard work. They rebaptized the brothel scenes “Merry Company” and saw the pile-up of luxury goods as a deserved reward for the qualities that had got them where they were. Item 27, an interior by Pieter de Hooch, embodies all the domestic virtues prized in both Old and New Holland: the mistress of the house sits on a low stool before a neat hearth, setting about her tasks like a truly Verstandige Kock (sensible, or better still, competent or even ingenious cook). Far from being a relegation of women to the murky indoors, this image is the celebration of their considerable powers, in a society when, with menfolk at war or on the high seas, women ran businesses and handled money matters with the authority that kept a bourgeois household like this one ticking over with ordered calm. Peter Rose completes the overview with a delicious recipe that the woman in the painting appears to be discussing with a servant, a delicately spiced apple custard made with sweet golden eating apples, wine, eggs, and ginger.

One of the earliest purchases of Dutch paintings was exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1871. It included 150 old masters including Still Life with Oysters by Jan Davidsz. de Heem (Item 24). This small painting is an enchanting virtuoso rendering of golden light bouncing off grapes, oysters, and a goblet of wine, perfumed with a swirling twist of citrus peel. Henry James may well have praised Dutch art at this inaugural exhibition for its honest virtues (“We know what it is to have turned with a sort of moral relief, in the galleries of Italy, to some stray specimen of Dutch patience and conscience”), but we can now enjoy the cheerful hedonism behind this particular image (mercifully lacking the usual paraphernalia of moral emblems) as a guilt-free delight in expensive luxury.

This book delights with its well-reproduced paintings, the meticulous descriptive notes of the contents, their possible interpretations, and insights into what foodstuffs people ate and how they cooked them. Art historical and gastronomic studies here complement each other and enhance our appreciation of the artists’ works, an admirable example of how food history can illuminate art history, while taking on board the complexities of interpretation that might otherwise distort our vision.

—Gillian Riley, author, The Dutch Table

Eating Apes

Dale Peterson. With an afterword and photographs by Karl Ammann


ix + 320 pp. Photographs. $24.95 (cloth)

This is a book with an agenda, and an attitude. The authors (with Peterson acting as Ammann’s amanuensis) argue that increasing hunting and consumption of gorillas, chimpanzees, and bonobos in Africa constitutes a compelling moral crisis, threat to public health, and challenge to biodiversity. Since apes share 96 to 99 percent of our genes, laugh and play, and use tools and language, they note, eating them constitutes virtual cannibalism. They are reservoirs of potentially devastating zoonotically transmittable viruses, like Ebola and HIV, so eating them also puts us all at risk. And their slaughter constitutes a threat to their survival in their last remaining habitats.

While the significance of the genetic similarities between apes and humans is debatable, the argument thus