claimed by France as her colony in the mid-nineteenth century, and ruled from Paris through the local capital city of Libreville, just inside the cape that separates the Atlantic from the estuary named in the book’s title. By the time of the country’s independence in 1960, people in the coastal cities had integrated their ideas about food into the expanse of France’s empire, but they had also surrendered their food security. Today, they import two-thirds of what they consume, in part because of their preference to eat, and to be seen eating, foreign foods.

Jeremy Rich discovers the roots of the modern predicament in the country’s colonial past, but he shuns a simplistic explanation of imperial hegemony to develop an account of these Africans’ creativity in changing their relationships with food. While the estuary’s fishers and farmers exported food to slave ships in the era of the trans-Atlantic trade, newcomers arriving from the nineteenth century on approached indigenous food with learned caution. New to the cities were French bureaucrats and businessmen, deported Vietnamese convicts, conscripted Senegalese soldiers, American missionaries and merchants, and wage-seekers from Liberia, the Gold Coast (now Ghana), and Gabon’s interior regions. Each contributed farming techniques, recipes, preferences, and ideas about alimentation to an always-changing, heterogeneous local culture of food that was (and continues to be) every bit as cosmopolitan as that offered in peer capitals. Their culinary repertoire drew on the world’s pantry: baguettes and “bush meat” taken from forests, imported milk and local manioc, Asian rice and native palm oil, and much more.

Rich organizes his efforts in chapters with thematic foci—including consumption, immigration, famine, and urban life—and they progress in a roughly chronological fashion, though with considerable overlaps in time. It is a rhetorical strategy that asks much of readers, who need continually to integrate for themselves the sort of political economy offered in Chapter 1’s overview and then the thematic content of previous chapters into the sections they are reading.

The author’s focus on food supply as a way of asking questions about empire means that readers more interested in coastal Gabon’s culture of eating, cooking techniques, and the intersection of gender history and food will want to continue on elsewhere—including to Rich’s many good journal contributions, listed in this book’s bibliography. There are missed opportunities in the book to relate this food history to the rich scholarship of eating beyond Africa, or to integrate the estuary’s culinary past into the well-developed historiography of popular culture in colonial Africa.

Gabon is one of Africa’s least-studied countries, particularly in Anglophone scholarship but even in French academic domains. *Gastronomica* readers would therefore find good company in wishing for a stronger and more immediately announced argument to guide them through these unfamiliar reaches of Africa and their local foodways. And readers might be excused for puzzlement at the author’s comparisons—no matter how spot-on they might seem to a specialized readership of African historians—to otherwise unfamiliar ethnonyms of continental neighbors and their distinctive histories with food.

Rich’s project is ambitious, and, given the relative obscurity of Gabon in academic and popular knowledge, it labors under a perhaps unfair burden. He needs to tell the history of the colony while also stressing the centrality of food, and must relate broadly known economic history of global empires to unfamiliar cultural changes in Gabon. In his introduction Rich confesses that this “task is not easy” (p.xv). That he mostly succeeds is worth commending.

—J.D. La Fleur, College of William & Mary

**Feast: Why Humans Share Food**

Martin Jones


ix + 364 pp. Illustrations. $35.00 (cloth)

Drive-thrus and TV dinners are not the end of society! Martin Jones lays out his archaeologically based message of hope in *Feast* by showing that modern American eating habits are but an extension of uniquely human ways of taking sustenance—in particular, our need to ingest society along with our nutrients.

Borrowing from ethnographic conventions, each core chapter introduces its historical period with archaeologically based fictional vignettes that transport readers to a precisely situated eating event. We marvel at new kitchen architecture along with a traveler to the Euphrates Valley eleven thousand years ago and share ruminations on a lifetime with a widow in Denmark some two thousand years in the past. The opening narratives set the stage for the description and interpretation of the archaeological evidence that follows. If the fictions sometimes read uncomfortably and fancifully, the subsequent discussions thoroughly explain why most of the narrative details were chosen, based on both site-specific finds and more generalizable data on the era and region.

What is the relationship between the biological and social aspects of human eating, and how did it come to
be? Beginning with careful analysis of modern-day primate eating behaviors, subsequent chapters jump back to our earliest proto-relatives, *Homo heidelbergensis* and *Homo neanderthalis*, suggesting a progression of behaviors from the kind of kin-and-sex-partner based exchange observed in bonobo chimpanzee communities to a more intimate reproduction-group-based core sharing the amenities of cave, fire, and mutual support. Tracing the shift from hunting and gathering to agriculture in several settings, Jones cogently lays out the great mystery of the Paleolithic revolution—why humans would have given up the superior nutritional security and lighter workload of the former in favor of the proven hard labor and oscillations in fortune of the latter. The parallel emergence of social stratification may point to answers—early Euphrates Valley seed residues and the remains of Mycanean feasts point to a strong hierarchization as food acquisition went from being the driving aim of everyone to a matter of specialization that freed others to pursue more abstract aims like political power. Analysis of a Roman site at Colchester, England, shows this hierarchy in full flower and introduces evidence for cultural imperialism as locals mimic Roman styles in an attempt to climb the social ladder at the periphery of the Roman empire. Culinary tastes and dining style were leading instruments for enculturation, as well as results of trade and empire building.

If the history of human eating is one of using food to link ourselves with other people, Jones finds that today’s solitary eater with her drive-thru burger is not so different from these human forebears after all. Citing Mary Douglas, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Jack Goody, Jones characterizes much of human social and cultural practice as taking place either in community (in-group) or in network (out-group)—but food has transcended that division and merged the two. Our solitary diner is not alone—she is likely to have the car radio on, or the TV, or to be reading the paper, or in other words, to be engaged in constructing her (globalized) social world as much as if she were eating with family or neighbors.

The theory is so strikingly resonant with Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community” and the food-specific literature it has spawned that Anderson’s work is conspicuous in its absence. Likewise, a spar with Claude Fischler’s critique of “gastro-anomie” could have moved the debate over eating alone forward. Since Jones’s book ends in the contemporary world, the conclusion of an otherwise captivating and fascinating read also suffers from speculation about today’s dining habits that could easily be substantiated with one last foray into the wilds of social-science research. Why guess that in-car eaters are listening to the radio when there is ample anthropological and sociological research to place solitary dining in real contexts? Similarly, the text would benefit from more references to back up information presented as general wisdom, which limits readers’ ability to pursue points of particular interest (the correlation between diminishing gut size and increasing brain size, for example).

Writing a serious text that can still appeal to a general audience is a Herculean task, and Jones has written an engaging, thorough, and captivating read that makes the social-biological bundle of human foodways much more legible as a process, even as it puts the science of archaeological analysis into lucid terms accessible to nonspecialists. I have to admit that I take comfort from the conclusion, since I eat breakfast and lunch over e-mail, swapping messages both banal and potent with friends, colleagues, and family members around the world. It’s reassuring to learn that I’m not antisocial after all.

—Juliette Rogers, Brown University

**NOTES**


*Beans: A History*

Ken Albala

New York: Berg, 2007

xiii + 247 pp. $24.95 (cloth)

Given our collective obsession with certain varieties of beans—coffee and cacao, for example—it is amazing that we have paid so little attention to legumes. Unlike ubiquitous Starbucks, bean stores are not on every corner, and most people don’t uncontrollably crave beans as they do chocolate. Perhaps because beans are so often associated with poverty and flatulence, we have largely ignored beans, deeming them too mundane for scholarly consideration. In *Beans: A History*, Ken Albala sets out to fill this void, unearthing a rich history that honors them as one of the most versatile and important foods of all time. Although favas are unlikely to replace Hershey’s Kisses anytime soon, his book forces us to consider the impact that legumes have had on the environment, economy, and culture.

The book could have been a dry chronicle, but Albala enlivens his obscure subject by unraveling the reasons behind the dichotomous reputation of beans. How can they be both the lowliest of peasant foods in some places and among the most desired and revered in others? How could Aristotle proclaim beans to be inedible (philosophers...