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 fava beans 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
believed they contained human souls and were part of the cycle of reincarnation), while the Aztecs revered them enough to demand tributes of beans from the people they conquered? Why are beans among the most denigrated foods and yet the foundation of so many foodways? The answers lie in the details. Albala wades through ancient texts, oral histories, and even pop culture to meticulously research the social, ethnic, and nationalist significance of beans, as well as the science, myths, and religious beliefs that have determined their place in diets around the world.

He begins with lentils, domesticated by the Sumerians in Ancient Mesopotamia ten thousand years ago. Once these nomads began to plant and harvest lentils, they settled down: “thus a few simple plants gave rise to what we now call civilization” (p.10). This contention may seem to overstate the lentil’s importance, but Albala traces this legume, as he does other varieties of beans, across place and time, explaining that even societies that eschewed beans as lowly peasant food (Egypt, Greece, and Rome, for example) depended on them to provide protein to their burgeoning populations. Not all ancient societies spurned beans, however, and some even revered them as vital [in India, a Hindu proverb confirms, “Rice is God, but lentils are my life” (p.14)].

Albala looks upon his subject lovingly and with humor, personifying each variety to show how it is inextricably linked to a place, a people, and an identity. “They are all quite different characters,” he writes, “...some homespun and honest, others rugged as the untamed West, others boisterous and flamboyant” (p.127). In Italy, people identify themselves as mangiafagioli (bean-eaters) in a self-respecting acknowledgment of their frugal and simple roots, just as black-eyed peas (“a proud and hardworking bean” (p.117) and a staple food for slaves) continue to define the soul food of African Americans in the South.

The narrative is most interesting when Albala is able to link the history of beans with contemporary food culture. He explains how the tepary bean, like the Native American tribes who grew them, disappeared with English colonization, and how the beans are now being grown again as “a way to recover indigenous culture and cuisine...as a way literally to survive as a distinct community” (p.205). Albala reminds us that beans, like all foods, are important tools for understanding tradition and heritage, and he reminds us how fragile these traditions—and our food system—truly are. Nowhere is this more evident than in his tracing of the soybean. What began as one of the basic sacred foods in Chinese culture and Buddhist philosophy has become the second largest crop grown in the United States and has morphed from the darling of vegetarian diets to the villain of modern industrial agriculture. (Produced mainly by huge agribusiness conglomerates, most soy is genetically modified for use in everything from animal feed to hydrogenated margarine and is the crop most blamed for destroying rural communities, the environment, and public health.)

Albala’s greatest success, then, lies in using the unusual subject of beans to urge us to view our food choices as political, ethical reflections of our values. Other books—The Omnivore’s Dilemma and Fast Food Nation, for example—have inspired a sincere and devoted movement to understand the origins of food, directing us to pay attention to who grew it, where, and under what conditions. We know to buy organic, to eat seasonally, and to shop at farmers’ markets, and we even have the global Slow Food organization dedicated to these principles. Albala expands upon this interest uniquely by analyzing the big picture of food culture through the tiny bean, projecting his hope that beans will not be forgotten as our food system evolves. “For those who regard the global food system as corrupt, a simple locally grown bean attaches people to place and community, and their pride in it is earnest (p.188),” he writes. “Beans may just rise again” (p.190).

—Eli Penberthy, The Cornucopia Institute, Seattle

Edible Medicines: An Ethnopharmacology of Food
Nina L. Etkin
Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007
xii + 304 pp. Illustrations. $24.95 (paper)

The back flap of this book states: “It will appeal to a wide range of scholars and professionals, as well as general readers seeking a greater understanding of the medical aspects of food.” And, indeed, Nina Etkin’s Edible Medicines: An Ethnopharmacology of Food will—although by appealing to such a divergent audience, Etkin, author of Eating on the Wild Side: The Pharmacologic, Ecologic, and Social Implications of Using Noncultigens, reveals in her latest book an extreme breadth of fact that can be difficult to keep track of!

Her work travels from the distant prehistory of medicinal plant use by Pleistocene peoples through a detailed discussion of the history of Western medicine (from the Greeks through the Middle Ages) to our contemporary culture of pills and pathology. This journey includes insights from across the world’s cultures, including the Nuer, the Hausa, and the Chinese. She discusses the variety of diets and consequent health patterns in these different cultures

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