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
as they move from sedentary to migratory, from wild to homegrown, from versatile to monotonous.

Etkin bases her work in the anthropological theory of human ecology combined with a biocultural perspective that considers the coevolution of interacting species. She dabbles in biochemical explanations of how the plant food system works, while keeping in check the sociocultural context to humankind’s changing ethnopharmaceutical consumption. And changing it is, as she so well explains by showing how approaches to health and medicine develop across cultures and time and importantly reminding us that our contemporary Western approach to medicine is neither the only method nor a constant one.

Etkin structures this plethora of data and detail in an accessible manner. The first two chapters provide the basics, with a detailed account of the biochemical basis of plants that progresses to an explanation of the cultural history of medicine in the West. She then delves into key food examples covering spices, fermented foods and beverages, social plants, and the medicinal qualities of animal foods. Little did I realize the nutritional value of wild foods and why it occurs, the dynamic, politicoeconomic history of spices, or the benefits and extent of fermented products. Neither did I gauge the often-overlooked opportunities of insect eating! Etkin closes with a conversation about health in the marketplace, which considers the use of vitamin supplements (the “magic bullets” of health), issues of genetically modified foods, commodification, and the emergence of “food by design.” For further research she provides an appendix, notes, references, and an index.

My only criticism of this work is also its strength—and that is its wide breadth of topic and detail. As she visits each theme, Etkin engages with the language of that field. When she introduces plant metabolism she writes about “metabolites, allelochemicals, polymers, phytotoxins and magic bullets” of health), issues of genetically modified crops, and prebiotics. “These colorful terms could easily confound (or tantalize) general readers who may only be beginning their exploration into this field. However, Etkin successfully explains the terminology to ensure that readers will understand these issues; this also means that her book can go into greater depth than other, more popular biocultural works. My advice to the general reader or student is to stick it out—for the wealth of knowledge contained in the book’s 228 pages is well worth persistence.

In summary, I recommend Etkin’s *Edible Medicines* to all scholars, professionals, general readers, and students who seek to go beyond common knowledge and solely Western examples to better understand the medicinal aspects of food. This rich book offers a balanced biocultural explanation of how food and culture meet in our cuisines to foster health across the globe. Its strong anthropological framework expressed in the theory of human ecology integrates the importance of culture within diet—something that is all too often neglected in scientific reductionist texts. Furthermore, Etkin’s work reminds us that it is the consideration of many cultures’ perspectives that make the best and healthiest brew to understand our health and who we are.

—Ferne Edwards, University of Melbourne

*The Atlas of American Artisan Cheese*

Jeffrey P. Roberts


In *The Atlas of American Artisan Cheese* Jeffrey Roberts dubs artisan cheesemaking a “bellwether” for small-scale American agricultural enterprise, one that might presage new alternatives to industrial commodity foods. The volume engagingly profiles 345 commercially licensed, artisan cheesemakers from Maine to Hawaii, out of a total of 400 Roberts has identified. This eye-popping number has doubled, he reports, since 2000. Only seven states lack artisan cheesemaking altogether (you may be surprised which). Roberts does not set out to explain why so many artisan cheesemakers are cropping up domestically (or, for that matter, how many businesses have failed). Rather, offering a mapping of new territories of taste if not an atlas in the strict sense (there are no “cheese trails” locating creameries on regional maps), Roberts knowledgeable guides readers across an expanding American landscape of agricultural artisans and the cheeses they create.

Cheese businesses are catalogued broadly by region and state. Each entry lists the year the enterprise was established, address and contact information, awards won, whether visitors are welcome, where to find cheeses commercially, and descriptions of cheese varieties and types (i.e., designated by ruminant species and breed and indicating whether cheeses are made on-farm, seasonally, using organic and/or raw or pasteurized milk). What sets this book apart from others recently showcasing new American cheeses are lively anecdotal sketches of each business owner and/or cheesemaker: how...