In Search of America’s Cuisine

Investigations into the nature of American cuisine are creating lively discussions these days, but the topic is far from new. In the middle of the twentieth century Craig Claiborne and James Beard routinely thought about what Americans ate as they explored regional differences and tried to sort out influences on American eating habits. But even before these two luminaries recorded their discoveries, writers were traveling around the country to find out what people were actually cooking in their homes and which dishes they prepared for special celebrations. Two new books, *Hometown Appetites: The Story of Clementine Paddleford, the Forgotten Food Writer Who ChronICled How America Ate* by Kelly Alexander and Cynthia Harris, and Pat Willard’s *America Eats! On the Road with the WPA*, offer new perspectives on our continuing attempt to define the eating habits of this nation.

The subtitle of this new biography of Clementine Paddleford, “The Forgotten Food Writer Who Chronicled How America Eats,” reveals the authors’ interest in trying to figure out why the most significant food journalist of her time faded into obscurity. Paddleford’s prominent newspaper career spanned three decades, starting from 1936, years in which she worked as a food writer at the *New York Herald Tribune*, wrote a column for *Gourmet* (from 1941 to 1953), and produced her “How America Eats” column, her best-known achievement, which had her traveling the country in search of recipes that represented American cooking. Written for *This Week* magazine, a *Herald Tribune* supplement, the column appeared in forty-two other American newspapers from 1940 until Paddleford’s death in 1967. In 1953 *Time Magazine* named Paddleford the “best known food editor in the United States.”

This hard-working journalist was born in a farm community in Kansas, showed an early interest in writing, and attended Kansas State University where she received a degree in journalism. There she met Lloyd David Zimmermann, the man she was to marry and then separate from when career goals sent them to different parts of the country. Realizing that New York City was the publishing center of the country, Paddleford moved there in 1921 without a job but with plenty of ambition. She struggled for a while as a freelance writer, but ultimately, after a brief detour to Chicago where she married Zimmermann, she found a staff position back in New York at *Farm & Fireside*, a monthly magazine that featured articles on food and housekeeping. She did well there and made a name for herself. By the mid-1930s she had landed a plum job at the *Herald Tribune*, then the leading paper in New York and the place where she built her career.

At the same time that she was achieving professional success, Paddleford experienced two terrible events, the death of her beloved mother, Jennie, and an illness that almost led to her own death. Always supportive of her daughter’s dreams, Jennie was also a realist who valued effort, telling Clementine, “Never grow a wishbone, daughter, where your backbone ought to be.” Paddleford needed some of that determination when she was diagnosed with throat cancer at the age of thirty-three. Her choices were to have her larynx and vocal cords removed, which would almost certainly be a cure, or the riskier treatment she chose that removed only the infected parts of her larynx, a treatment with no guarantee of a cure but one that would still allow her to speak. Although she did remain cancer-free, the surgery left her with a permanent hole in
her throat and an apparatus with a button she had to push in order to speak. By all accounts, her voice was deep and throaty and on the eerie side, but Paddleford took her condition in stride and continued her amazing travel schedule that allowed her to interview many more Americans about what they were eating.

Alexander and Harris do a workmanlike job of tracking Paddleford’s career, basing their research mainly on her collection of papers housed at Kansas State University, but the biography falls short of bringing to life the writer, the people she knew, and the times in which she lived. Paddleford’s husband remains an elusive figure, and though there had to have been tensions in the marriage, we can only guess what they might have been. We are told she had many lovers but get no information about who they were or why she never settled down with any one of them. And though she lived through difficult times in our nation’s history, we get little sense of her response to the Depression, World War II, and the peaceful 1950s.

Another missing piece to this biography is a discussion of Paddleford’s career within the context of women’s history. Her life span—1898 to 1967—immediately precedes the women’s movement, so she lived at a time when women’s
roles were clearly defined and mainly domestic. She seems to be in the tradition of such nineteenth-century American women as Catharine Beecher and Sarah Josepha Hale, who built successful careers by professionalizing domesticity and writing about it. But we are left wondering if Paddleford was accepting of this traditional niche or, given the opportunity, would have preferred to have been a different kind of journalist. Did she ever think about breaking out and investigating politics, perhaps by interviewing presidential candidates? And since we know she loved to travel, did she dare to dream of being a foreign correspondent and interviewing heads of state? Or did she unquestioningly accept the only choices available to female journalists: writing about food or fashion? At least by writing about food she found a way to travel and learn about ordinary people.

Regarding Paddleford’s diminished reputation, Alexander and Harris suppose that the demise of the Herald Tribune had much to do with it, as well as the fact that she never appeared on television because of the problems with her voice. But there may be more to it. Although Paddleford was innovative in the kinds of food stories she pursued, her writing style and the food she wrote about were very much of their time. In How America Eats, the 1960 collection of her columns, certain sentences stick out. About New York City she says, “…besides being our eat- ingest city, this little old Manhattan which we bought from the Indians for a few bottles of rum is still the drinkingest.” Such chirpy writing, as well as such old-fashioned recipes as the iconic green-bean casserole made with frozen beans and canned fried onions, or a recipe for coconut marshmallow cake with marshmallow frosting, make the book and its author something of a period piece. This does not diminish her achievements, for Paddleford was ahead of her time in going beyond the workaday home-economics approach to food. She did, after all, bring enthusiasm and meaning to the pleasures of eating and the place it has in the everyday lives of people.

Like Paddleford, Pat Willard set out to discover what America eats, and though her journey occurred in the twenty-first century, her guidebook was the 1935 WPA America Eats! Project. Following President Roosevelt’s New Deal, this Federal Writers’ Project was launched and a proposed book, America Eats!, was planned. Teams of otherwise unemployed writers were sent out to various regions of the country to do oral histories and capture family stories and community food rituals. Their charge was to record America’s foodways, although that term was not applied, and the overall idea was to avoid creating recipe books in favor of descriptions of family and community rituals around food.

From its start the project seems to have been fraught with problems, because writing about food was new territory for most of the writers Willard describes as “thousands of laid-off reporters, fledgling novelists and poets…country librarians, housewives, and recent college graduates” (p.3). The vision of Katharine Amend Kellock, the book’s editor, was that the writers would fan out to cover a range of local community events where food was served, some obvious like church suppers, family reunions, and state fairs, and others unique to the times or particular places: possum dinners, gleaning parties, and hobo encampments. Writers and regional directors frequently had different interpretations of their tasks, and they in turn would disagree with the head of the overall project in Washington. Some areas of the country produced quicker and better results—the South, for example, no doubt because southern foods are distinctive, or perhaps because their regional project directors had a better feel for food. In the end, though, it did not matter who completed their assignments and who did not, because the entire project was abruptly stopped in 1941 when America went to war. But, as Willard points out, the effort had always been on shaky ground because, like other publicly funded arts projects, it was vulnerable to accusations of being a silly boondoggle or a haven for radical intellectuals. Although some of the project’s unpublished writings remained in the regions, most of them were boxed up and shipped to the Library of Congress, where Pat Willard found the materials for her book.

This America Eats! story becomes the basis for the year-long journey Willard took throughout the United States, following the paths of some of the writers to see which of the community rituals were still being practiced, what changes have occurred, and what, finally, the nature of American cuisine might be. The book becomes a series of chapters organized mainly around types of gatherings—agricultural fairs, political gatherings, church suppers, funeral ceremonies, and such, and each is an amalgamation of excerpts from the 1935 project along with Willard’s contemporary observations. The result is a disjointed effort that lacks narrative drive. The chapter “City Lights,” for example, has an essay on New York’s McSorley’s Tavern, followed by Willard’s rumination on city eating that includes her concern about rising costs, especially for immigrant restaurant owners and grocers. Then back we go to a paragraph from the project on the presence of many nationalities in New York, followed by Willard’s chat about the present-day changes in ethnic neighborhoods, suggesting that they are...
Willard seems to think that America is a country that is unique in its diversity when it comes to cuisine. She says, for instance, “Cooks in other countries adhere more closely than we do to a master recipe and this makes their classic dishes more uniform” (p.281). What she says may apply to French classical cooking but surely is not true when it comes to, say, Italy, which has a hugely diverse cuisine varying not only from one region to another but sometimes from one neighborhood to the next. This again proves how difficult it was for Willard to find an overarching theme to her book, because trying to define and characterize American cuisine may well be impossible. What is most valuable about her effort is that she has brought to light interesting historic documents that describe what Americans were eating in those prewar years beginning in 1935. And that, finally, may be the lasting value of this noble though failed Depression project.

In dealing with such an overwhelming amount of diverse material, Willard sets up a straw man—that people assume that American food is inferior to other national cuisines—and then proves otherwise by describing some wonderful communal meals. But we already knew that America has some wonderful food, and so, we suspect, did she.