Garlic Capital of the World: Gilroy, Garlic, and the Making of a Festive Foodscape
Pauline Adema
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Since 1978 Gilroy, California, has held an annual garlic festival, establishing itself as the garlic capital of the world. In Garlic Capital of the World: Gilroy, Garlic, and the Making of a Festive Foodscape, Pauline Adema traces the history of this festival, identifies some of the processes surrounding it, and explores its cultural implications. As the title suggests, the book expands beyond Gilroy to look at the meanings of such events and the ways in which they reflect contemporary American life and concerns. The topic is a timely one—and significant—since food festivals are currently enjoying popularity throughout the country as a strategy for marketing local food, creating an image or brand for a place, building communities, and developing local economies.

Adema addresses these topics, placing them within contemporary contexts of globalization and American culture. The book is based on ethnographic and historical research and offers a good background of the development of this festival. A significant contribution is the discussion of the way in which the festival might mirror labor relations in industrial agriculture, with the workers “hidden” and relegated to two contests on garlic braiding and topping. A chapter on an unsuccessful food festival is also included as a comparison to the commercially successful Gilroy one. Adema also draws upon theories and methods from a range of disciplines—American studies, folklore, oral history, cultural anthropology, and cultural studies. Her overviews and summaries are useful, but I have several concerns about this book.

First, the summaries of theory frequently leave out significant works that should be credited, and she claims some terms as her own. The concept of foodscape, for example, has been used extensively by folklorist Eve Jochnowitz. The phrase “place-based foodways” was introduced into academic and public-sector folklore dialogues by Rachelle Saltzman, while any discussion of food and ethnic identity should include the scholarship of Bill Lockwood and Yvonne Lockwood. (At the risk of sounding petty, I would also expect writing about food and tourism to include my own work on culinary tourism.) That Adema ignores some of the most active contemporary foodways scholars is puzzling. It is also misleading in that readers are not being pointed to major sources of scholarship.

Secondly, the discussions of theory are not always connected to the discussions of Gilroy. Theories tend to be summarized but not consistently used in shedding insights into the processes behind the making of the festival. The result is that parts of the book read like reviews of literature. Similarly, Adema tends to use a number of concepts and terms that are not explained fully. Because of this, the text reads to me, at least, as unnecessarily jargonistic.

Finally, claims are made about the meanings and significance of the festival that I feel are not substantiated. For example, did the Gilroy festival really accelerate garlic’s acceptance by mainstream America (p.45)? How does the “presence of festival queens affirm[s] the importance of female authority in American culture in general,” or the young women vying for this royalty affirm “the significance of garlic as iconic of positive elements of Gilroy as a community” (p.65)? Similarly, the discussion of the comparison festival, PigFest, states first that it failed because of the “social semiotics of pigs” and American’s negative associations with the animal, but then goes on to discuss successful uses of pigs as iconic images of places. (This chapter as a whole seems like an aside since it does not directly address the Gilroy festival, and the book’s title focuses on Gilroy.)

With those caveats, the book does cover a lot of ground and suggests connections among diverse realms of scholarship, such as marketing, tourism, and cultural studies. The chapter titles reflect the range of approaches and speak for themselves, so I include them here: Chapter 1, “Making a Foodscape: Gilroy and the Iconization of Garlic”; Chapter 2, “The Festivalization of Garlic: Creating and Celebrating Community in Gilroy”; Chapter 3, “From Foreign to Fad: Garlic’s Twentieth-century Transition”; Chapter 4, “Garlic Galore: Festival Inversion, Subversion and the Enactment of Garlic as a Food.”
of Labor Relations”; Chapter 5, “Place Branding and Selling Place: Creating and Marketing Identity Capital”; Chapter 6, “‘This Little Piggy Went to PigFest…’: The Paradox of PigFest”; and Chapter 7, “Festival Foodscape: Food Symbolization and Place Making.”

Garlic Capital of the World offers readers a thorough description of Gilroy, the history of the festival, and aspects of festivals that are frequently overlooked. It also raises a number of interesting questions about the meanings and functions of food festivals and their popularity in American society, demonstrating the multiple layers of complexity behind these seemingly straightforward events.

—Lucy M. Long, Bowling Green State University

Bite Me: Food in Popular Culture
Fabio Parasecoli
viii + 168 pp. $29.95 (paper)

Pleasure and power, ingestion and excretion, identity and assimilation—not to mention vampires, South Park, and something called “pimp juice”—are all fair game as targets of inquiry in Fabio Parasecoli’s Bite Me: Food in Popular Culture. The author preemptively concedes the enormity of his two chosen subjects, eschewing the impossible task of addressing them in full and instead opting to take the reader on a virtual tour across the psychic and ideological battlefields of the everyday. Topics and chapter headings, such as “Tasty Utopias” and “Of Breasts and Beasts,” are seemingly arbitrary and based on the author’s impressively eclectic interests, but, taken collectively, they serve as useful tools toward understanding the semiotics of food in our increasingly fragmented consumer culture.

The ubiquity of food and eating makes for fertile scholarly ground; however, it is precisely this colloquial, seemingly innocuous role that can mask deeper, often insidious complexities far beyond the material aspects of consumption. True to interdisciplinary form among emergent works in food studies, Bite Me runs a gamut of critical theory and popular references in presenting food’s impact on all aspects of life in Western society—from race, class, gender, and sexuality to politics, economics, and religion. Parasecoli’s real turf, however, is “pop,” that elusive territory encompassing notions of “highbrow,” “lowbrow,” and everything in between.

On the well-worn path of modernity, in which grand narratives cease to be and meanings and subjectivities play an endless round of musical chairs, Parasecoli stands out for his rejection of cynicism. He seems to be saying that contemporary life is anyone’s game and that food is at its heart, literally constituting us, while pop culture mounts its psychic assault from within our market-driven environment. Consequently, we require adequate defenses and coping mechanisms, namely knowledge, understanding, and the ability to retain our love of pleasure without succumbing to guilt, real or imagined. Those interested in Gramscian or Situationist theory take note.

What is necessary, according to Parasecoli, is a new analytical framework, one that is able to decode the pop onslaught and redirect it toward humanitarian ends. Further, this new methodology should be couched in accessible language and its aims and ideals made available to the general reader, not just academics. While the author deftly weaves concise summations of heady theoretical material (hinting at his proficiency as an instructor as well as an author), in this regard Bite Me is perhaps a bit too ambitious, and its scope more than a bit utopian. Still, the book’s intention is admirable and its execution quite astounding.

Perhaps most impressive are Parasecoli’s ravenous capacity for information and his impassioned pursuit of texts both “legitimate” and “trashy.” He seems to sincerely enjoy it all—one can imagine him sitting at a multiscreen console simultaneously displaying Truffaut, Robocoup, and America’s Next Top Model, enjoying pâté de foie gras and washing it down with America’s newest, hippest energy drink. He even knows his hip-hop and seems equally in his element discussing the relative merits of Nelly or Lacan—a rare ability, indeed.

While Bite Me stops short of proposing a concrete new analytical framework, it brings several still useful methodologies up to date, resituating them in the context of contemporary food culture through the corporeal lens of the body. Namely, the tenets of structuralism, semiotics, and media studies are employed (and adeptly summarized for the neophyte), resulting in a sort of food-based Mythologies for the twenty-first century. Once we understand the symbolic and hegemonic machinations of pop culture, we can begin to “ensure that somehow passive consumption becomes active enjoyment and then participation and choice” (p.150).

Parasecoli is a scholar with a heart. His writing is genuinely brilliant and genuinely genuine; his approach is refreshing, with lively and original material. Bite Me is an important book that will gain relevance as we advance into the frenetic zone of our century’s second decade. There is little doubt that Parasecoli will be at the forefront with all lines of communication and media open and at the ready.