Stirring the Pot: A History of African Cuisine
James C. McCann
Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009
xiv + 213 pp. Illustrations. $26.95 (paper)

The international immersion experiences of Peace Corps volunteers can profoundly affect their lives. In Boston University historian James McCann’s book Stirring the Pot: A History of African Cuisine, one senses that his academic fascination with African history, especially African foodways and culinary history, is rooted in his Ethiopian Peace Corps experiences in the 1970s. Certainly his text is heavily weighted in favor of that country.

Stirring the Pot identifies “cuisines” as more than foods and recipes, considering them important markers of cultural identity woven from the varied economic, political, geographical, historical, social, and cultural threads that the book surveys. As was true of McCann’s earlier work, Maize and Grace: Africa’s Encounter with a New World Crop 1500–2000 (2005), Stirring the Pot is a welcome addition to the sparse literature on African history, food and foodways, and popular culture.

McCann wields his brush with an historian’s eye and perspective, and his strokes are necessarily broad and bold. The book is aimed at a wide audience, ranging from mature secondary-school students through undergraduates and general readers, but graduate students and academics will also find its detailed documentation helpful. The book focuses on the time period between 1500 and 2000. Part 1 consists of two chapters that introduce ingredients and seasonal eating; Part 2 takes a deeper look at Ethiopian food culture, particularly an 1887 feast held by Queen Taytu Bitul that was heavily laden both with incredible amounts and varieties of food and important political, social, and economic goals. Part 3 is split between West African culinary history and a chapter on eastern and southern Africa, especially the “maize belt” and the Swahili coast. Part 4 concludes the book with a discussion of African diaspora cooking and a brief epilogue listing recommended readings. To support his narrative McCann relies heavily throughout on oral and written recipes as historical texts.

The book is part of an Africa in World History series, and the editors have mandated authors to write on an “accessibly modest scale.” Courageously undertaking this daunting task, McCann largely succeeds; he tempers scholarly research with respect for his subjects, subject matter, and audiences. The book covers much familiar territory and largely resonates with this reviewer: e.g., African culinary improvisation techniques, Jack Goody’s “impossibly narrow” view of African cuisines, the importance of texture in cooking starchy, the adoption of New World and other crops, the dynamism of African culinary experimentation, seasonal and geographic variations, political influences, the flexibility yet continuity of the oral tradition, similarities and differences in regional cuisines, and so on.

There are a few (understandable) disappointments: the title implies that the book is continent-wide when it is really limited to sub-Saharan Africa, and it omits most precolonial food history. McCann could have explored more fully the connection between Brazilian farinha de mandioca and gari. He ignores links between oral tradition and recent popular culture, e.g., television cooking shows and online videos, and no online resources are included. A few authorities are absent (e.g., Igor Cusack on African food and national identity and anthropologist Cherie Hamilton on Portuguese culinary influences).

There are several troubling errors or misrepresentations: Figure 2.10, “Drying capsicum” (p.59), is credited as “Photo by author,” when it is in fact the same photo of Lishan Sefu that appears in Laurens van der Post’s 1970 African Cooking (p.35). There is no source information on Figure 4.2, “Salome’s dance before Herod.” McCann states that European restaurants tend to mix national African cuisines inter-regionally and implicitly generalizes from that, but in the United States that is not usually the case. He asserts that my book on Food Culture in Sub-Saharan Africa “surprisingly” has only a single recipe for a maize dish but neglects to mention there are only twenty-four sample recipes in the entire book (plus, he missed two others: samp and beans and matata). McCann’s book covers a dizzying range of information and no one can possibly be an expert in everything. Thus there are some small mistakes, for instance regarding Ghanaian fufu preferences—most Ghanaians in the southern part of Ghana eat plantain and cassava or cocoyam fufu, not yam (eaten in the north), plus other ethnic groups might claim that the main starch is kenkey, tuo zaafi, or akple. It is a contradiction (in Ghana) to say a “light palm oil soup” (there are “light” soups, “groundnut” soups, and “palmnut” soups). Nigerians as well as Ghanaians have a long history of street-food vendors.

Despite these minor points, McCann has done a solid job of fulfilling his task. The book is like the Queen Taytu feast it opens with: the author spreads out a similarly laden table and invites us to sample the various textures and layered tastes that comprise African cuisines, and to look for the meanings behind them.

—Fran Osseo-Asare, State College, PA