Books in Review

Chow Chop Suey: Food and the Chinese American Journey
Anne Mendelson
xx + 313 pp. $35.00 (hardcover)

Anne Mendelson’s *Chow Chop Suey: Food and the Chinese American Journey* is an excellent and detailed guide to the development of Chinese food in the United States. She has done thorough and painstaking historical research on Chinese immigrants and their adapting to the new homeland, especially their *xiang banfa*—“finding a plan, finding a way.” Improvisation, inspiration, and substitution allowed generations of Chinese to cope with the frequent lack of facilities, ingredients, and money. They learned to use what they could. Harsh treatment of immigrants, including exclusion for decades, limited the community and drove immigration underground. People coped. In the rural areas, they learned to forage wild plants and use game. In urban ones, they learned to be ever more frugal with ingredients. The oft-described cruelty and oppression of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries slowly abated in the mid-twentieth, but Chinese American cooking remained the product of years of hard times.

The result was a cuisine that has been condemned for not being “authentic” (a word I avoid) or even very tasty, but in fact it can be good, and it served to fill and satisfy countless eaters of all races and ethnicities. Chop suey was adopted from Cantonese *tsap seui*, “miscellaneous leftovers,” a vegetable growers’ dish using small and hard-to-sell vegetables. (Mendelson dispels the many delightfully silly origin myths that have grown up around the dish.) Fried noodles and soup noodles took on a life of their own. Sweet-sour cooking spread from fish to pork. Mendelson chronicles a long story of restaurants trying new approaches and styles, moving upscale or staying downtown, spreading from the initial San Francisco and New York beachheads to the entire United States.

From my experience, “American Chinese” food, with its chop suey, *yatka mien* (“one bowl of noodles”), egg fu yung, chow mein, and wonton, survives now especially in remote rural areas. Here they serve a clientele of local blue-collar workers who have known the restaurants for decades. Recent immigrants from China now run some of these old small-town landmarks, and have been known to shake their heads in wonderment at what they are expected to cook in the name of “Chinese food.” They learn (*xiang banfa!*), and usually cook some of their own Chinese dishes also, introducing them slowly to familiar menus.

Mendelson discusses in detail the landmark cookbook *How to Cook and Eat in Chinese*, by Buwei Yang Chao, which introduced many of us in my generation to actual Chinese everyday food. Buwei came to the United States with her husband Yuenren Chao, a Harvard-educated writer and teacher who was one of the leading linguistic scholars in the world. He, and their daughter Rulan Chao Pian, translated the book—he actually added a great deal of his own delightful touches, and the book is a good read even if you don’t cook from it. I knew the family fairly well, and ate at their house occasionally, reveling in Buwei Yang Chao’s good cooking. Dr. Chao’s sage teaching, and the company of warm and charming Rulan.

Mendelson continues with accounts of the rise of ever more diverse Chinese foodways, as immigrants from all parts of China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong opened restaurants. Now, these range from rigidly traditional to wildly “fusion,” and from super-expensive to exceedingly economical. They represent all areas of China. Some non-Han ethnic minorities have begun to open restaurants. Mendelson also provides a very detailed, perceptive, and excellent overview and evaluation of cookbooks. Chinese food has attracted a vast legion of followers, ethnically Chinese or not, and they love to write, so we are well supplied. Another of the most interesting themes of this book is the many sociological observations on clientele—from rural Americans just wanting a square meal to Craig Claiborne and other famous “foodies” (she tells us the origin of that word).

This book is fuller and more detailed than Andrew Coe’s *Chop Suey*. For San Francisco, it is comparable to Erica Peters’ wonderful *San Francisco: A Food Biography*, but of course that...
work is limited to one city. Particularly valuable in the present book is its up-to-date coverage, bringing the history of Chinese American food and of Chinese cookbooks in English up to the end of the twentieth century. This book represents a guide we have long needed, and a very useful historical resource. It is also very well written—a delight to read.

—E. N. Anderson, University of California, Riverside

The Routledge History of Food
Edited by Carol Helstosky
New York: Routledge, 2014
vii + 355 pp. Illustrations. $245.00 (hardcover)

Each time we make note of what and how we eat, we are implicit contextually hypothesizing our culture, agricultural system, political system, and economy. But the diversity of sources means that food history can be a disparate subject with research ranging from the studies of commodities to human exchanges to the environmental and agricultural. Should we bother to solidify it, and if so, how? Carol Helstosky’s edited book The Routledge History of Food makes a convincing case that despite a diverse range of topics, time periods, geographies, and methodologies, all food history scholarship ultimately includes a single overarching premise: that it connects all of us across time and place.

Helstosky’s introduction is important, as it both presents the case that food history is not a singular, unified field and provides a blueprint for the book. Organized into three time periods (1500–1700, 1700–1900, and 1900–present), each section has its own underlying theme: respectively, the relationship between food, individuals, and society; the role of food in globalization; and the commercialization of food in the twentieth century.

The chapters focusing on the early period (1500–1700) emphasize the symbolism in food, how it took on meaning beyond that of sustenance, and how it helped shape the relationship between individuals and society. Eric C. Rath, for example, notes that just as labor-intensive rice cakes in pre-modern Japan symbolized good luck to the individual, they were also representative of a cohesive community identity (pp.3–18). Alternately, Ken Albala writes that as individuals gained widespread access to alcohol and stimulants in Europe, international temperance groups sought to control consumption through policy, religion, and social pressure (pp.42–60). Although these two examples vary in their perspective, they both point to established relationships between individual food preferences and societal concerns.

The second section, focusing on the years 1700–1900, highlights the increasing role of food as a tool and byproduct of globalization and social hierarchies. In this new interconnected world, defined by the categorization of people as free or slave, civilized or uncivilized, colonizer or colonized, “Food acted as a memory, a connection to the past, and a signifier of one’s ancestral roots” (p.148), writes Kelly Fanto Deetz in her chapter on the relationship between slave cooks and their mistresses. This was true not just of the marginalized people, but also of those in power. Other chapters, for example, covered British women in India trading cookbooks and home manuals as a means of building community (pp.131–55), and African rulers leveraging their power by regulating the food supplies available to British colonists (pp.92–112). The reader can conclude, therefore, that food had become a tool for exerting control across the colonial world.

The concluding section takes readers through the last century, one marked by the industrialization of food at the hands of governments and businesses. As colonialism ceded to statehood, food production and consumption became commercial pursuits. Ranging from the fast food industry to food tourism and entertainment to government participation in agriculture, these chapters explore conspicuous consumption and emphasize food as a potential tool for consolidating wealth and power.

Helstosky ends the introduction by noting her hope that this book will “illustrate clearly how food connects us to other worlds” (p.xxxi). In this, the book largely succeeds. Although several chapters invite further research into how the study of individual food items or trends play a role in shifting cultural norms or expectations, the best chapters in this book successfully draw from many sources to show exactly how each food story influenced economies, agriculture, social tensions, environments, and politics. Ultimately this anthology should appeal to anyone who wishes to explore the breadth of what the study of food history has to offer.

—Jacqueline Grady Smith, independent scholar

The Architecture of Taste
Pierre Hermé
Petit SK Lublin, Poland: Sternberg Press, 2015
95 pp. (paper)

I will be honest; when I heard the title, I was hoping for a richly illustrated book on the structure of decorative plated desserts, which The Architecture of Taste is not. It is more of an artistic documentation of cooking as performance art, based on a lecture given at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design by chef Pierre Hermé in 2012. About half of the text is the transcription of what Pierre Hermé himself said; the other half is the commentary of the moderators, Sanford Kwinter and Savinien Caracostea.

Chef Pierre Hermé walks the audience through his process of creating four different pastries, each with a different basic