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978-1-107-14036-3 - Cooking Cultures: Convergent Histories of Food and Feeling

Edited by Ishita Banerjee-Dube

Excerpt

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## Introduction

### Culinary Cultures and Convergent Histories

ISHITA BANERJEE-DUBE

Lo, the pious are in gardens and delight,  
 Enjoying what their Lord hath bestowed upon  
 Them, and their Lord hath protected them  
 From the punishment of the Hot Place  
 Eat and drink with relish, for what ye have been doing

(*Qu'ran*, 1939, 2, Surah 52, The Mount, 536;  
 cited in Peterson, 1980, 321)

An intimate association of eating with sensual pleasure in Muslim theology – depicted in the Garden of Delights – had occasioned serious unease in the Christian world that could barely digest the bonding of religion and sensuousness. What caused immense concern was the fact that this ‘philosophy of gratification’ did not only promise joys after death. It spoke of, indeed encouraged, the reaping of pleasure in life by associating good life with good eating (Peterson, 1980, 321). This was in stark contrast to the austerity and temperance demanded of Christians in this life as a step toward an angelic society in heaven (Peterson, 1980, 322). Hence, after the *Qu'ran* was translated into Latin by the mid-twelfth century, scholars devoted themselves to the task of discerning whether this association was real or allegorical. Others, however, found a different use for this bonding of eating and pleasure in this life. An ‘upheaval’ occurred in the cooking of the European elite from about 1300 CE, accompanied by a marked change in the attitude toward food (Peterson, 1980, 317).

I begin the introduction on this note to divulge, at the outset, an important argument of the book. The volume seeks to explore how food, cooking and cuisine, in different societies, cultures and over different periods of time, are essentially results of confection – combination – of ingredients, ideas, ideologies and imagination, inflected by relations of power and experiments with creativity. Such blends, churned out of transcultural flows of goods, people and ideas, colonial encounters and engagements, adventure and adaptation, and change in attitude and taste, enable convergent histories of the globe kneaded by food

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and cooking that tell us about being and belonging, pride, identity, hospitality and sociability, class and power, and nation and culture that are ever ready to be cast in different moulds. They also point to a convergence between the histories of the world as one of 'species migration', whether through climate or habitat change or population pressure, or through more active processes of human intervention, and of food, eating and cuisine as being constituted by such mixing and migration. The different chapters of the book look at the evolution of food in distinct parts of the globe over different periods of time from diverse perspectives. Yet, together they portray and convey the polyphony that surrounds food and cooking, a polyphony often subsumed by the attempted homogenisation that underlies the construction of 'national', 'natural' or 'regional' cultures. In contrast to such homogenisation, this book offers a tale strewn together from a variety of smells and tastes, peoples and places and their multiple mixtures. The chapters also highlight the importance of sharing and exchanging food as vital elements of 'culture' and sociability, elements that are often used to mark social distinctions and not erase them (Peters, 2016; Pilcher, 1998).

An early cookery book of Baghdad had drawn upon the *Qu'ran* to declare food to be 'the noblest and most consequential' of the six human pleasures, along with drinks, clothes, sex, scent and sound (Peterson, 1980, 322). The write-up on an adventurous book on the history of food calls cuisine '*the* defining characteristic of a culture' (Fernández-Armesto, 2002). What makes food and cuisine tick as the 'noblest pleasure', and the most significant element of a culture? What makes Indian food serve as 'street food' in Cairo and 'court food' in Isfahan and yet remain a prop of national culture? How has 'curry', invented during British rule in India, moved back and forth between India and England and come to signify 'Indian food' in the world? This volume addresses some of these issues in its attempt to track how peoples and cultures relate to food and cuisine, and how such bonding shapes cartographies of belonging and identities. It explores the elements and processes that go into the cooking of cultures, in which food and cuisine are flavoured by adaptation and innovation, transcultural and trans-regional flows, and nostalgia and re-creation; and 'national', 'regional' and 'cosmopolitan' cultures, along with personhood, are concocted and confected.

The volume takes into serious account reminders that food, as an important element of material culture, significantly shapes individual and collective identities (Palmer, 1998, 183) and that food is neither neutral nor innocent but a product of dominant ideologies and power structures (Cusack, 2000, 208). Indeed, the first essay of the volume examines and interrogates why and how certain plant and animal species are constructed as 'natural', 'native' and

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'indigenous' as opposed to 'alien' and 'invasive' through human intervention even before the process of cooking transforms them into food (Brown, 2016). At the same time, it pays attention to how food is produced by means of a delicate blend of emotion and creativity, nostalgia and affect, and cultural exchange. Even while cultural exchange is unequal – and identity and emotion surrounding food are permeated by established structures, power relations and norms that condition subjectivities – ingenuity, resourcefulness, adaptation and blending add vital flavour and spice to cultures of cooking and buttress the cooking of cultures.

This work draws inspiration from incisive statements that point to the intimate links between love and nurture, food and desire, and hunger and satisfaction. Here are two instances. M. F. K. Fisher, the celebrated US writer on food, had stated in the 'Foreword' to her now classic *The Gastronomical Me* (1943) that she wrote on food, eating and drinking and not about more 'serious themes' such as struggle for power and security because the 'three basic needs, for food and security and love', are so mingled and entwined, that 'we cannot straightly think of the one without the others.' A few years before the publication of Fisher's book, the humanist and nobel-laureate poet from Bengal, Rabindranath Tagore, had alluringly evoked the innate pleasures of love and care articulated in the tender serving of food by the lover, an act that simultaneously satisfied the mind and the body. In this poem titled *Nimantran* ('Invitation' published in *Bithika*, 1935), the poet had mused on how the expectant meeting with the lover was to become more enthralling and complete if she were to serve delicacies garnished by her care, and gratify thereby 'the nest of desire that resides in the tongue'. Such statements, made by different persons in distinct locations, serve as the basic dough that gets baked in diverse ways in the different chapters.

Ambitious in terms of its range and scope, the volume straddles various parts of Asia and Africa, and touches upon Australia and Mexico with tempting references to Europe. It also covers the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries and themes as diverse as notions of indigeneity and wildness centring on the trout in South Africa; power struggles over and through food and diet in Vietnamese villages; 'Hummus wars' between Israel and Palestine, the distinct meanings of local food in central China and their gradual standardisation in restaurant chains; the role of women as procurers and providers of food in the Senegalese capital of Dakar; the significance of the domestic servant, the 'cookie', in the development of colonial cuisine in Malaysia and Singapore; blending, hybridity and nostalgia inherent in transplantations and reproductions of smells and tastes of 'authentic' food from Syria to London, and from Morocco to Paris

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and Adelaide. It also explores early attempts to create a well-organised menu and 'modern' cuisine in colonial eastern India that took the health of the family (and the nation) as its central concern; the various moods, sentiments and meanings associated with sweets in Japan; food taboos in Mozambique as critical markers of personhood and 'humanness' as opposed to the 'sorcerer'; and the differential deployment of myths in the construction of Mexican 'national' cuisine.

In brief, the volume covers almost all the important themes examined in food studies over the last decade and a half: food and identity, food and power, food and nation, food and (ritual) symbolism, food and gender, and food and affect. Its distinguishing feature is the exploration of convergent concerns, as well as divergent sentiments that mutually shape cultures of cooking and the cooking of cultures through the construal of being and belonging in distinct parts of the globe. The various essays 'deconstruct' food as a finished product in order to lay bare the essential blend that gives meaning to food and cooking, the 'origin' creation, to use the words of Modhumita Roy (Roy, 2010, 67). In distinct ways, the chapters track the course of plant, animal and human movement and human intervention, transcultural flows dating back to several centuries, and unravel the production of food and cuisine as premised, on the one hand, on unequal relations of power and ideology, colonial encounters, and class and gender relations, and on the other, on innovation and experimentation, love and pride and inspiration that endow the everyday act of procuring, cooking and consuming food with polyvalent significance. The volume unpacks how the inherently mixed nature of food and cooking shores and spikes up notions of 'national culture', identity and personhood, and often serves to perpetuate established unequal social relations even while boundaries get constructed and transgressed simultaneously. A combination of distinct lines of research covering a large part of the globe makes the volume essentially rich – in smells and flavours, myths and metaphors, tales and battles, temptations and taboos, and succulent savouries that enable juxtaposition and comparison and open the way for convergent histories of food and feeling across the globe.

## State of the art

The discipline of anthropology, we are aware, was the first to take serious note of food and eating as important themes of research. Early practitioners of the discipline such as Raymond Firth (1934), Bronislow Malinowski (1935) and Cora Dubois (1941) had commented on the centrality of food in cultures. Historians of the French *Annales* School had also paid serious attention to food and eating patterns from around the same time. A few decades later,

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cultural anthropology took the lead in emphasising the importance of food and foodways for human societies and, by extension, for social sciences. The classical writings of Claude Levi-Strauss (1966, 586–96; 1970; 1978), Margaret Mead (1971), Mary Douglas (1971, 61–81), Sidney Mintz (1979, 56–73), Pierre Bourdieu (1984) and Roland Barthes ([1961] 1979, 166–73), to take just a few examples, not only offered valuable ethnographic details on food and underscored food and cuisine as crucial elements of culture and personhood, but also reflected on the capacity of food and cooking to serve as codes that conveyed significant social meaning.

Such writings were complemented by anthropological studies of particular societies that analysed the role of religious symbolism in food transactions and food taboos (Marriott, 1976, 133–71), as well as by cultural materialist works – such as that of Marvin Harris – that rejected semiotics to insist on economic and ecological factors behind the selection of gustatory elements by particular peoples (Harris, 1975). Social and cultural historians contributed to this scholarship by analysing food as an index of changing class relations or as a mode of sustenance that nourished bodies and identities (Tannahill, 1973) for instance.

Works on nutrition, health, agriculture and economics offered distinct understandings of the value of food for sustenance, while important anthologies examined the evolution of food in particular societies from historical and anthropological perspectives (Chang, 1977). In addition, insightful analyses of transformations of food patterns occasioned by industrialisation offered comparative perspectives on food in different societies (Goody, 1982, 154–74); innovative readings of cookery books commented on the changing configurations of ‘national cuisine’ (Appadurai, 1988, for example); and experimental historical-anthropological readings commented on how a particular element of food contributed to shifting demarcations of the self from the other in a particular culture (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1993).

Specific articles in journals of history and anthropology, such as Toby Peterson’s ‘The Arab Influence on Western European Cooking’ (1980), opened new ways and consolidated research on food and cooking. A specialised journal in French, *Petits Propos Culinaires*, started coming out from the 1980s; ‘The Oxford Symposium of Food History’ offered a space for the exchange of ideas to interested students; and David Burton’s *The Raj at Table* (1993) connected the empire and the colony through flavour and taste by offering a delectable social history of the emergence of colonial dishes – the essence of curry.

Food studies got a tremendous boost from the end of the twentieth century with the publication of a wide range of anthologies, interdisciplinary studies,

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and journals dedicated entirely to food. The *Oxford Companion to Food* appeared in 1999, accompanied by Carole Counihan and Penny van Esterik's reader on *Food and Culture* on the other side of the Atlantic ([1999] 2013). *The Cambridge World History of Food* (2000) was soon to follow. Felipe Fernández-Armesto made a strong case to integrate food history as an integral part of world history in his entertaining work, *Near A Thousand Tables*, while Lizzie Collingham's *Curry: A Biography* (2005) and *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors* (2006) enticingly mixed recipes and their histories, chance invention and deft adaptation, to offer an account of the development of British-Indian cuisine and its move back to Britain. Such British-Indian recipes feature recurrently and prominently in 'Indian' restaurants in England run primarily by Bangladeshis.

*Appetite, Culture, Agriculture, Food and Foodways, Global food History*, to name just a few of the wide range of journals, strengthened food studies as a valid and valuable field of interdisciplinary investigation. This went hand in hand with the participation of geographers, philosophers, psychologists, literary, feminist and film studies scholars in food studies. Together, they broke the preserve of anthropologists, historians, sociologists and economists over food and cooking and enormously enriched research on food.

Counihan and van Esterik credit feminist and women's studies scholars with bringing about this explosion in food studies. The insistence of such scholars, argue Counihan and van Esterik, on the necessity of studying a 'domain of human behaviour so closely associated with women across time and cultures', helped foster an interest in food among many (Counihan and van Esterik, 2013, 2). This, together with the politicisation of food and a growth of social movements linked to food, established food as a central element of human lives. And once it gained legitimacy, the 'novelty, richness, and scope' of food opened innumerable pathways for scholars to follow (Counihan and van Esterik, 2013).

Food has increasingly come to be recognised as a mode that communicates a lot about culture and consumption, moods and emotion, taste and identity, hunger and privation, and hierarchy and discrimination. If the evolution of the Renaissance banquet has been studied as representative of social relations and etiquette, class and table manners (Albala, 2007), a surge in commodity histories, that of a spice, a plant or a species of fish, (Kurlansky, 1998, 2003; Coe and Coe, 2000; Turner, 2004) have added a different dimension to what constitutes food. If such histories tend to tell a story of triumph, a rags-to-riches tale where one humble fish, or mineral or plant fights aristocratic prejudices to find favour among one and all (Roy, 2010, 67), they also underscore the significance of food as commodity. Such studies moreover, are adequately complemented by many

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other studies of how what we eat gets constructed, identified and valourised, as well as invested with meanings and emotion. If Laura Esquivel's *Como Agua para Chocolate (Like Water for Chocolate)*, an edgy literary text alluding to recipes for food and for broken heart (that also got made into a film) represents the play with love and cooking in literature, the inclusion of Fisher's foreword as a foreword to *Food and Culture* by Counihan and van Esterik demonstrate their belief in the entwinement of love, food and security affirmed by Fisher.

The intimacy and intensity of food and feeling find daily expression in innumerable cooking and baking competitions, television shows and a profusion of recipes in magazines, newspapers and journal columns, and a surge in signature restaurants of chefs. Trips today, lament some and revel others, of upper-middle class and rich people from various societies and places are not measured any longer by what they have seen – museums or archaeological sites – but by what they have eaten in which restaurant.

This work pays attention to this change of orientation from sight and sound to smell and touch in offering another food tour across the globe, one that offers insights into feelings and emotion, taste and choice, and struggle and adaptation that go into the constitution of cooking and cuisine as central artefacts of culture and society.

## The palate

The volume offers a mosaic of the many meanings of food and cooking through fragments of smells and tastes, markets and kitchens, restaurants and menus, sharing and competition, and food taboos to chart distinct cartographies of love and affect, being and belonging, and identity and power. It intends to probe why people eat what they do, how they relate to food practices that define what cooking is, and the many ways cuisine relates to society and social relations to see if one can glean a 'culinary philosophy' (Laudan, 2013, 1). At the same time, it also wishes to unravel the construction of food and cooking as blends and confection – of ingredients, innovation, spices, trans-regional and cross-cultural interaction, power and ideology, adaptation and creativity, and feeling and sentiment – that constitute cuisine as a vital element of social life. The common thread that runs through the chapters is a consideration of how food and cuisine enable people to articulate not just who they are but what they want to be; and the interplay of intersecting processes and sentiments that go into the making of people as persons and of groups and communities as 'cultures'.

The volume is divided into four sections, each with distinct yet overlapping and crisscrossing concerns. The first one, on 'Food, Pride and Power', includes contributions on South Africa, the Middle East and Vietnam. It begins with a suggestive essay by Duncan Brown on notions of indigeneity and wildness as played out over understandings of the trout as an 'invasive, alien species' in South Africa. Pointing to the fact that plant and animal species move, not just on account of human intervention such as transportation, planting and stocking, but also on account of habitat and climate change, Brown upsets simple notions of indigeneity, endemcity and the right to belong from the beginning. He sustains this further by analysing the *Oxford English Dictionary's* definition of 'belonging' as '[to] be rightly or naturally placed [... to] fit a specified environment, or [to] be not out of place', to argue that the definition(s) make an easy equation between 'to be naturally placed', 'to be in the right place' and 'to belong', an equation that is 'heavily loaded with moral values'. Hence, such definitions are both subjective and specific. The moot question, in Brown's reckoning, is what is given the right to belong and why. In South Africa and other societies marked by colonial histories, such an issue is closely tied to that of human identity. The binary divisions of 'natural' or 'native' versus 'wild' or 'alien', 'nature' versus culture' are as treacherous as they are misleading because they are predicated on biological models that exclude human intervention, and do not take social or cultural activities like 'cuisine', 'cultivation' or imaginative association, and moral values into account. Brown uses the debate on the continued presence of trout in South Africa to creatively think through the complexities that underlie conceptions of indigeneity, alienness, and identity and advocates an understanding of biodiversity and belonging not in terms of simple origin or autochthony, which is 'deeply problematic', but in terms of (biological) interdependence and accommodation.

The second essay tracks issues of belonging and 'naturalness' by following the conflict (and camaraderie) between Israel and Lebanon over a shared culinary passion: Hummus. This dip, of mashed chickpeas seasoned with tahini and lemon juice, is ubiquitous in Middle Eastern public and private culinary spheres and is extremely popular among Arabs and Jews. In 2008, hummus became the focus of a heated debate between Israel and Lebanon over issues of cultural copyright and national heritage and their implicit economic repercussions. Focussing on these 'Hummus Wars', Nir Avieli unfolds a colourful tale of the enactment of a series of culinary contests that aimed at the reification of hummus as the key element of the culinary heritage of both nations. Proportion, rather than flavour, became crucial in this contest as Lebanon and Israel competed to set the Guinness world record for the largest hummus dish. Avieli's situated, spicy

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and 'internal' ethnography of one such contest in the Palestinian-Israeli village of Abu Gosh highlights how cooking and cuisine transcend the social sphere and straddle the political where they mediate and negotiate the construction of national identities. Such processes again are muddled by the active participation of 'minority' groups, Palestinians of Israeli citizenship who engage passionately in the construction of Israeli identity and pride through gastronomy. Such muddled passions together with the fact that hummus easily lends itself to diverse appropriations and is essentially meant to be shared, leads Avieli to ponder whether hummus has the potential to serve as a bridge between the inhabitants of two warring nations and bring an end to enmity via commensality.

Erica J. Peters' essay unfolds a multi-layered world of everyday strife and control over food in Vietnam over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, starting with the state and going down to individual families in villages. If Vietnamese rulers tried to control the countryside through food, often putting pressure on non-Vietnamese populations to change their eating patterns, particularly during the time of civil war and food scarcity in the late eighteenth century, their rivals made a bid for power by seizing government granaries and giving rice to the starving people. In the nineteenth century, a new crop of emperors made a new and distinct attempt to control and solidify 'national' culture through food, by putting pressure on non-Vietnamese people, not only to change over to 'Vietnamese food' and agriculture, rice in particular, but to learn to eat sticky rice with chopsticks. The imperial project of creating a 'civilised' national culture and cuisine was fraught with tensions. Apart from the fact that a fragile economy where food scarcity was a recurrent feature made it difficult to force people to fall in line, the composite mix of Viet, Khmer, Cham and others in the south with very similar eating habits, made the project of civilising the 'non-Viet' people almost impossible.

The struggle for access to and control over food, affirms Peter, was by no means one of rulers versus subjects: it was played out in villages and within individual households. If particular households competed to control major butchering and banqueting rituals, members of a family fought over the daily apportionment of rice. The sharing of food at common feasts was a way, not of erasing boundaries of class and status, but of reinforcing them. Women, who prepared the food for feasts and banquets, did not even sit at the common table with the men. Such gendered norms got worked out in the way food – especially sticky rice – was apportioned within the family. The emotional and physical hunger and desire of women, their need for food and love, found articulation in popular, irreverent poems composed by female authors. Using food as a lens

to unpack the distinct and minute gradations within class and social hierarchy, this chapter offers a rich blend of economics and politics, gender and class, and power and resistance in Vietnam over two centuries.

In the first essay of the second section on 'Cooking, Cuisine, Gender', Leong-Salobir emphasises the active and innovative participation of the domestic cook and servant – the 'cookie' – in the development of 'colonial cuisine' in Malaysia and Singapore. Arguing against readings that highlight how the British ate only 'British' food in the colonies in order to mark their distance from the colonised, Leong-Salobir portrays an intricate world of multi-layered interaction between the *memsahib* – the mem – the white mistress, and the cookie, that resulted in the emergence of a colonial cuisine with distinctive dishes, flavours and blends. In this cuisine, British diet and taste were not only moulded by Asian expertise, ideas, ingredients and flavours, but also guided by reference to India (South Asia) as the original source for recipes of decidedly colonial dishes such as the mulligatawny soup or kedgeree or pishpash, a fact that added interesting twists and turns to this tale of mishmash.

Class, race, gender and power were worked out on distinct registers in this multi- and inter-cultural conversation and transposition. If the white memsahib was entrusted with the difficult and delicate task of running the British household as an institution of the Empire with a staff of primarily male colonised servants who needed to be 'civilised', the servants deployed their own notions of food fit for British tastes to create and prepare hybrid dishes that found their way to colonial dinner tables. For memsahibs, whose husbands were in the lower rungs of employ and could not depend on cooks and servants, the task of efficient and competent management of a British home was even more hazardous. Leong-Salobir's absorbing analysis, premised on a close reading of domestic manuals, recipe books and memoirs and travelogues, offers vistas of a fascinating world of cross-cultural fertilisation that was often poised on distrust. The white mistress was ever vigilant of the servants and cooks misuse or abuse of money and material in the purchase and preparation of ingredients and dishes; the cooks in turn were suspicious of the memsahibs' knowledge of proper cooking. This tense collaboration, where the 'mem' spelt out the menu and measured and supplied the materials for the preparation of food, and the 'cookie' cooked, spiced, flavoured and decided on what was fit to be eaten at different times of the day and on different occasions, resulted in the emergence and evolution of a distinct colonial cuisine spread across South and Southeast Asia, which got transported back to England and to other parts of the globe.

In the following essay, Ishita Banerjee-Dube deftly complements the world