BOOKS: FOOD

A Feast Without Recipes

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This compendium will tell you everything you ever wanted to know about food, plus quite a few things that might well put you off it. *The Cambridge World History of Food* justifies itself as the food book of the millennium. The two volumes include commentary on almost everything that humans have ever eaten, including some items that many of us no longer find palatable (such as snakes, dogs, and, even, insects).

Watching the scene in the 1960s Italian film *Mondo Cane* in which a woman eats a plate of cooked ants with relish might make us squirm, but the chapter by Darna Dufour and Joy Sander on insects shows that they are good nourishment. Smoke-dried caterpillars, for example, are a rich source of protein (53% by weight) and will provide 425 kilocalories per 100 grams (an amount falling between the values for similarly prepared fish and tapir). Insects, however, may never have been popular as food, although we do enjoy the product of their labors in the form of honey. And the manna from heaven that helped the Israelites survive in the wilderness is actually the cocoon of a desert beetle.

The Cambridge World History of Food
by Kenneth F. Kiple and Kriemhild Coneè Ornelas, Eds.
Cambridge University Press, New York, 2000. 2-vol. set. 2207 pp. $150, £95. ISBN 0-521-40216-6.

The more than 150 authors offer a banquet of knowledge, and the bulk of it is reassuringly wholesome and scholarly. As is only to be expected with so many contributors, however, there is a certain unevenness of treatment. Some chapters are replete with data, and others provide merely a taste. A particularly good example of the former is Sheldon Aaronson's discussion of algae (seaweed) as food. Aaronson lists all the edible varieties and their amino acids, trace elements, and vitamins—information absent from standard compilations such as McCance and Widdowson's *The Composition of Foods*. Seaweed is not a part of most Western diets, but in the coastal regions of Japan and Southeast Asia it has been eaten for centuries. And the same is true for Wales, where it is eaten as laver bread, a dish made of seaweed dipped in oatmeal and fried in bacon fat (not quite so unpalatable as it may sound).

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These tomes certainly do not neglect unusual foods. Although I failed to find any reference to ostrich meat (which was popular a few years ago in top European restaurants), there is an essay on camel meat. I also learned about taro, a nutritious root grown in the tropics and which almost disappeared as a crop in the 19th century.

The chapters are arranged into eight main categories: prehistoric diets, staple foods, dietary liquids, nutrients and related disorders, national developments, history, food policy, and a dictionary of plant foods. These are followed by 360 pages of indexes. The entries are not just about foods themselves; many take up human attitudes to food. Jeffrey Pilcher writes entertainingly on food fads, Louise Grivetti discusses religious taboos, and Thomas Benedek examines aphrodisiac and anaphrodisiac foods. He recounts men's unsuccessful attempts to find the dietary equivalent of Viagra, and he reveals what foods to avoid, like lettuce and cucumber.

Some coverage seems a little brief. There are only eight pages on wine, although Jancis Robinson's *The Oxford Companion to Wine* (1994) is where most people would turn for information on that topic. Perhaps the slight attention paid to wine reflects a suspicion that it is not really a food. Other topics covered in the same section (dietary liquids)—such as beer and ale, kola nuts, and khat—may also be a little out of place. The leaves of khat, grown in the Middle East, are chewed (or infused in water) for the mild intoxication they produce.

These are only minor criticisms for such a monumental work, which embraces the interactions of food and humans from the extremes of anorexia nervosa and famine to the equally common ones of obesity and gluttony. In respect of the latter, I was somewhat surprised to discover from Leslie Sue Lieberman's chapter that it is not the United States which has the highest percentage of grossly overweight individuals. (Its 15% is slightly eclipsed by the Germans, 16% of whom wobble home with the extra pounds so damaging to their health.) Of course the overconsumption that causes this is only possible under circumstances where famine no longer threatens, which is all the more reason to read Brian Murton's chapter about life at the other margin. There we find that famine is not simply due to crop failure, but equally to human perversity.

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Like the pie of nursery rhyme, wherever I stuck my thumb in these two volumes, I pulled out a plum. The work's most obvious competitor is *The Oxford Companion to Food* (1999), edited by Alan Davidson. That also has an encyclopedic format, but the two approaches are not intended to satisfy the same appetite. Davidson and his contributors focus on the acts of preparation, cooking, and eating. *The Cambridge World History of Food* offers a very readable assortment of biology, history, social, and cultural perspectives. Turn to Oxford if you just want to snack, but visit Cambridge if you really want to feast.

BROWSINGS

Feeding. Form, Function, and Evolution in Tetrapod Vertebrates. *Kurt Schwenk*, Ed. Academic Press, San Diego, CA, 2000. 553 pp. $99.95, £79.95. ISBN 0-12-632590-1.

The contributors provide a detailed survey of the wide variety of means by which terrestrial vertebrates procure, process, and swallow their foods. Through a series of empirical chapters that consider particular taxa, the authors examine the anatomy, kinematics, and control of tetrapod feeding apparatuses

GeoComplexity and the Physics of Earthquakes. *John B. Rundle, Donald L. Turcotte, William Klein*, Eds. American Geophysical Union, Washington, DC, 2000. 294 pp. $60, ISBN 0-87590-978-7. Geophysical Monograph 120.

A new understanding of earthquake physics is emerging from the construction and analysis of numerical simulations. Fault systems are characterized by strongly correlated dynamics, which give rise to the observed scaling laws and the patterns of earthquakes in time and space. This volume explores how chaos theory and fractals can clarify complex systems and may help improve methods for prediction.