

They conclude with the hope that ‘this volume has provided readers with the intellectual wherewithal to ask the social, cultural and scientific questions necessary to create a more sustainable, supportive, secure and biologically diverse agricultural economy.’ Amen to that.

DI MURRELL

Jonathan Morris: *Coffee: A Global History*: Reaktion Books, 2018: 208 pp., hardback, £10.99.

Demet Güzey: *Mustard: A Global History*: Reaktion Books, 2019: 144 pp., hardback, £10.99.

Anastasia Edwards: *Biscuits and Cookies: A Global History*: Reaktion Books, 2019: 136 pp., hardback, £10.99.

Clarissa Hyman: *Tomato: A Global History*: Reaktion Books, 2019: 144 pp., hardback, £10.99.

Another four contributions to Reaktion Books’ apparently endless catalogue in their ‘The Edible Series’. Each explores the history of a particular food item or beverage. The trick, for the author, is to be informative and readable yet succinct. One assumes that in order to conform to the parameters of size and shape imposed by the series format the books can only contain a certain number of pages and illustrations. A book about coffee may have rather more to say for itself than, for instance, one about tomatoes with, one suspects, the author sometimes forced to sift through a wealth of detail for those gems that will spark the reader’s interest. For this reason these little books cannot be judged on the basis of how much information they may contain. Rather I look for ‘readability’; do they hold my attention? am I learning something new? is my interest sufficiently peeked to motivate me to find out more?

*Coffee* is by Jonathan Morris, an historian rather than food writer. He tracks the drink from its first appearance among Sufi sects in fifteenth-century Asia through to the coffee aficionados of the twenty-first. Who drank it; how it was prepared; where it was drunk; and what it tasted like – all is documented here. It describes the infrastructure within which the beans are processed, traded and transported and discusses the geopolitics which link the coffee farmers with those who drink their product.

Morris divides the development of coffee into five specific eras starting with its earliest cultivation on Yemen’s hillsides and no more than a locally drunk beverage to it becoming a European colonial commodity during the eighteenth century. He tracks its development into industrial product during the nineteenth century when huge plantings in Brazil aided the birth of a mass-market in the USA. Finally, by the mid-twentieth century, it had become a global commodity. In our times a reaction against ‘commodification’ brings a re-evaluation. Today sees the rise of the *barista* and coffee reclassified as a ‘speciality beverage’.

Clear, well written and precise, *Coffee* was a good read. At the end of the book is a list of coffee-shop terminology and is presumably there to assist the uninitiated, elderly or just plain backward. I found it most helpful.

*Mustard* by Demet Güsey is packed with facts, anecdotes and images. It's an entertaining read whisking us along, through its history and geography, by way of recipes and the condiment's appearance in popular culture, literature and religious texts. The mustard plant is found across the world, testament to its longevity and popularity.

This is a thoroughly agreeable little book – as far as it goes. It is about mustard used as a condiment. Here the size of the book imposes the constraints already mentioned so that, in spite of the title description 'a global history', Güsey has no space to discuss mustard, the spice, and how it is used in cookery. The continents of India and Asia receive barely a mention. I do suspect though, that given the amount of research she must have done, she probably has more than enough material for a companion volume.

*Biscuits and Cookies* by Anastasia Edwards has a more nebulous quality than others in the series that simply chart the global geography and history of a specific plant or animal. A biscuit is an amalgam of ingredients and the finished product depends upon their availability. It has also to be baked, therefore is predicated upon the use of certain cooking utensils, a methodology and a source of heat; variables which must make tracing the biscuit's global history complex and likely to lead one down any number of interesting side alleys.

Once, biscuits were no more than slices from a loaf baked for a second time to become long-lasting dry rusks, hence the name derived from the French word *bis* (twice) *cuit* (cooked). Biscuits in ancient times were serious and purposeful things – armies marched and sailors sailed upon them, metaphorically speaking. They were easy to transport and edible enough when dipped in water or wine. The crude flatbreads of peasant cookery, where a mash of grains and water could be baked on hot stones beside an open fire, barely changed throughout centuries. In those homes where the central hearth persisted into relatively modern times, these rustic flatbreads slowly gave way to the cooking of waffles, wafers, and galettes. It was the eventual appearance of ovens in domestic kitchens and commercial bakeries, better milling processes, and most importantly the arrival of sugar, which created the true biscuit: those crisply baked, sweet confections, that we know today.

Crucial to the continuous and growing popularity of the sweet biscuit was the appearance of a written description, the earliest of which appeared in 1485. Thereafter biscuit recipes featured regularly in cookery books and by the nineteenth century they had moved rapidly from something baked in the home or by a small baker to the first truly global convenience food. The biscuit lends itself entirely to industrialization; to becoming the commodity that it is today. It is the perfect snack and, once enclosed in factory packaging, has a long shelf life.

A small book that, like its subject matter, is an easily digestible package full of tasty tidbits. Finally, Anastasia Edwards lists a great biscuit bucket-list in the appendix. I do recall absolutely loving Jammie Dodgers as a child although now can only think of them as some rival gang ready to shape up to the Peaky Blinders.

*Tomato: A Global History* by Clarissa Hyman is another enjoyable excursion with us tripping our way through the tomato story. It's my favourite fruit, so I thought, 'lucky Clarissa to get to do this one'. Yet, I wondered, just where do you start with something as ubiquitous as the tomato? Sensibly she starts at the beginning, traces it from source in the Andes, tracking its development through to modern times. On arrival in the Old World its lack of popularity initially was due to native conservatism. Nevertheless in spite of making little impression upon Europe until the late eighteenth century, the facts are that tomatoes were prolific, easy to grow and therefore easily incorporated into the diets of the poor. In time, interest in the tomato steadily grew and the tomato began to be cultivated in the gardens of the rich.

Clarissa charts its transmutation from small and sour berry into the 'love apple', that thing of beauty, lushness, heady sweetness and perfume that we know today. She tracks it across continents and back again. Italian immigrants returned it to the Americas in drastically altered form and cultivation began on a commercial scale. Today it flaunts itself in an ever-increasing variety of colours, shapes, and guises. Sadly, its very fecundity also made it ripe for 'industrialization', all too often turning it into a genetically manipulated, tasteless, hydroponically derived abomination – 'the garnish' that squats on the edge of every plate of food served up by lazy chefs. Happily, in recent times there has been a move to bring back flavour; to grow the old breeds in the ground and ripen the fruit in the sunshine. We are encouraged to eat them seasonally. Coequally the growing of tomatoes is seriously big business and the book finishes with the news that we are now awaiting the first harvesting of tomatoes to be grown in space.

Personally I am content to settle for the ones I grow in my garden and using them in the intriguing recipes to be found in the final pages. What a story, truly from rags to riches, and one which Clarissa Hyman tells so well.

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Madeleine Neave: *Vintage Breadboards: Makers, Designs, and Recipes*: Prospect Books, 2019: 270 pp., paperback, £16.00.

The Antique Breadboard Museum in Putney on the south side of the River Thames is unique: a small Putney terraced house; the front room packed with breadboards and breadknives (I should stress the knives, they're quite as interesting as the boards); a curator who takes the awestruck visitor carefully through the collection – which was made by her late mother, Rosslyn Neave,