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David Gentilcore: *Food and Health in Early Modern Europe. Diet, Medicine and Society, 1450–1800*: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016: 250 pp., paperback, £19.99.
If today we are assailed by conflicting medical advice on what we should eat and why, matters were no less confusing in the past. David Gentilcore quotes Michel de Montaigne, 'If your doctor does not think it good for you to sleep, to take wine, or some particular meat, do not worry; I will find you another who will disagree with him.'

This fascinating book relies on deep research into an unusually wide range of printed European sources and commentaries. Nearly a quarter of the book is devoted to notes and bibliography. There is an excellent index although a few entries have slipped a page in the course of production.

Each topic is considered from the point of view of advice on health modified according to new scientific ideas including the nature of digestion, changing social attitudes and geography. The anchor point was the works of Galen, whose revision of the ancient rules for the healthy life – regimen – were modified, reworked and re-interpreted, but only challenged in the seventeenth century. Basic humoral theory linked the four bodily humours, blood, black bile, yellow bile, and phlegm to pairings of the four elemental qualities hot, dry, moist or cold. Maintaining a proper balance between them was the secret of health. The same principle was applied to bodily parts and organs, the four ages of man, the seasons, plants and every possible item of food or medicine so that by assessing a person's temperament it was possible for a doctor to predict what was wrong and the most likely ways of restoring the balance through choice of diet and adjustment of regimen.

Throughout this era, writing on regimen was a highly successful literary genre. Some works went into an enviable number of editions published over many years. Alvise Cornaro's *Della vita sobria* (On the sober life) of 1558 went into 65 editions in English alone and was still being recommended in the eighteenth century. Many other works had a wide international distribution, but who were the readers? Initially it was common to assume that only the wealthier members of society were rich enough to be able to follow the advice and indeed the poor were physically more suited to a coarser and more limited way of eating. Then as now there was a wide gap between medical advice and what people actually ate. Water and wine was advised in moderation but 'France was awash with plonk'. The gap was widest when it came to vegetables – deemed cold and moist by nature and therefore high on the danger list especially for women and children who were thought to be innately cold and moist.

Fish was problematical, especially eels. Even in a nineteenth-century court case the defendants were exonerated from a charge of poaching when the lawyers were able to argue that eels were not fish. Fungi and cheese were viewed with suspicion as being associated with putrefaction and yet these were common and essential foods for a large part of the populace. The reinstatement

of vegetables was achieved amongst the élite and even deemed to be healthy with changes of fashion, but fish never caught up, at least in England.

Religiously inspired food habits, fasting as well as feasting, come under scrutiny. Paradoxically Lenten and other periods of fasting were an excuse for luxurious methods of presenting and preparing foods which of course invited condemnation as did as did any form of excess in either direction. Even here there was room for medical controversy and debate.

New World foods, on which the author has written extensively elsewhere, provoked suspicion. Early settlers were perplexed by the absence of essential foods in new territories – '"May you give us now our daily tortillas" had to suffice' for some colonists and the indigenous population wishing to take Communion in New Spain. Aubergines had a particularly bad reputation yet as foods such these, alongside maize, tomatoes and potatoes were incorporated into local dietaries in Europe, medical authorities slowly and often reluctantly managed to accommodate them under the Galenic umbrella.

Over the period there was a shift when availability, taste and fashion left standard medical advice out of the argument. Spices and sugar originally allowed to correct unwelcome characteristics were used purely for flavour. New understanding of the processes of digestion over-rode the old theories and by the eighteenth century we meet familiar names in a new context. Some practised what they preached. Gentilcore puts Dr George Cheyne in the forefront of later writers on regimen, for all his quirky advice incorporating the latest iatromechanical theories. He gave simple rules for healthy eating and living but struggled to keep to his own regime.

Dr William Buchan renewed interest in regimen in his *Domestic Medicine* (1756). His book now addressed ordinary households and went into at least nineteen editions on both sides of the Atlantic and the Channel. In a later edition he included results of his studies on the effect of cooking on the nutritional value of various foods, replacing the qualities attributed to them according to old classical theories and giving new weight to advice on regimen.

This stimulating and enjoyable book will surely provide a spur to further study, as the author suggests. For those with an insular outlook it is an important introduction to a much wider field. The lucid account of shifting medical philosophies is far removed from the more conventional tales of inexorable medical progress. Having had a foot in both camps, I welcome the bringing together of food and medical history. Researchers are offered a new and wider perspective based on a better understanding of the influences at work.

Layinka Swinburne

Colleen Taylor Sen: *Feasts and Fasts, A History of Food in India*: Reaktion Books, 2015: 336 pp., hardback, £25.

Colleen Taylor Sen's new book is the most comprehensive and thorough on