PPC 106 (2016) 121-123
https://doi.org/10.1558/ppc.28143
Petits Propos Culinaires (print) ISSN 0142-7857
Petits Propos Culinaires (online) ISSN 3029-0651

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

© Equinox Publishing Ltd. 2023, Office 415, The Workstation, 15 Paternoster Row, Sheffield, S1 2BX
equinoxonline

the subject so far. The nearest comparison is *Indian Food* by K. T. Achaya, published over twenty years ago. Sen's book is more accessible and she displays her considerable scholarship with more elegance and a lighter touch. The book is beautifully designed as well.

Its range, from prehistory to the food of the Indian diaspora, is impressive and she even includes clear, easy recipes so that we can taste the food mentioned. Indian food, like the country itself, has absorbed all kinds of cultural and religious influences while always remaining recognizably itself. The very earliest Indians had aubergines, jackfruit, spinach (*saag*), mangoes, ginger, green and black cardamom, turmeric, tamarind and black pepper - all ingredients that we still readily associate with Indian cuisine. There is extraordinary continuity through the centuries.

Sen often uses food to illustrate the larger cultural history of India. We learn enormous amounts of broader Indian history while reading about food preparation, agriculture and the emerging religious influences on diet. I was especially fascinated by the connections the book makes between food and ritual, the earlier culture of animal sacrifice that eventually gave way to general (but by no means universal) vegetarianism and what Sen calls the new orthodoxy, a period that stretches from 300 BCE to 500 CE, the time of the Dharmasutras, books of law, the most famous being the Manu Smriti or Laws of Manu. This was the time when the caste system came into being and with this system emerged all manner of taboos and proscriptions on the food that the higher castes (the twice-born) could eat. Whether these rules were always observed is impossible to know. The diversity of Indian food is always there as in contradiction to any laws. In the chapter devoted to the Middle Ages, we are even treated to a recipe for the black rats that inhabited the field and riverbanks.

Sen is also very good on the connection between food and medicine which is still very evident in Indian families today. Indians believe that every kind of food has its own medicinal properties. This attitude is shown to be a very old one. I recognized the well-known heating versus cooling foods theory but Sen shows other such theories. Many are full of common sense. Sen provides a list of Ayurvedic dietary instructions, most,of which any of us would agree with except perhaps this dictum: 'Eat without laughing or talking, with concentration, considering your constitution and what is good and not good for you as you eat.' That conjures up a rather less than convivial dining table.

Islam reached India in the seventh century, barely a generation after the life of Muhammad. For the next 1000 years various Muslim dynasties held power in the country, bringing a discernible Middle Eastern (Persian, Afghan) character to Indian food as well as reshaping and transforming local dishes. What interests me is the way in which this style of cooking and eating –

equinoxonline

essentially a court style – so quickly became representative of Indian cookery in general. The food we are served in our High Street curry houses is a version of Mughal food, albeit probably cooked by Sylhetis who themselves eat Bengali cooking. And it should also be said that Mughal food itself differs enormously across the country. There is a recognizable difference between the Mughal dishes served in Delhi and Murshidabad, Lucknow and Hyderabad.

The arrival of Europeans brought huge changes as well. The most transformative group among the Europeans were clearly the Portuguese, who seized Goa from the Sultan of Bijapur in 1510. Having already established colonies in the New World, the Portuguese introduced potatoes, chillies, okra, papayas, pineapples, cashews, peanuts, maize, custard-apples and guava to India. Sen also wonders if the Portuguese might have influenced the famous sweets of Bengal. Bengali sweets contain a kind of cream cheese called *chhana*. *Chhana* is made by splitting milk with citric acid – a well-known method in Europe but one that breaks a major taboo in Indian cuisine. I have read Sen's Oxford Symposium paper on the subject and find it very convincing.

The British, unlike the Portuguese, seem to have brought comparatively little in culinary terms. In this case, the influence worked the other way round although there certainly is a strange half-remembered Anglo cuisine that can be found in clubs and very old hotels still.

The one massive contribution Britain made to the food of India is tea. The first tea grown in India was from Chinese bushes planted high up in Darjeeling but shortly afterwards indigenous tea was discovered in Assam. Now tea is the great Indian beverage par excellence.

The Indian Diaspora, which basically began in the 1830s, has taken Indian food around the world. There are now 30 millions Indians living outside India, a scale matched only by the Chinese. Chicken Tikka Masala is said to be Britain's favourite meal.

All in all, Feasts and Fasts is a fascinating book, packed with information and one that should stand as the definitive work for some time.

Joe Roberts

Reynald Abad: *Le Grand Marché: l'Approvisionnement alimentaire de Paris sous l'Ancien Régime*: Fayard, 2002: 1032 pp., paperback, €45.70.

Magisterial is the first word that comes to mind to descrine Reynald Abad's 1000-page *magnum opus*. Thorough, comprehensive, painstakingly researched, and logically and lucidly written follow soon after. This examination of the food supply for Paris in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries represents historical research on a grand scale and complements Steven Kaplan's earlier study of the grain and flour trade in the eighteenth century.

Abad begins by asking five basic questions: Where did the foodstuffs come from? How did they reach Paris? Who were the men and women responsible

equinoxonline