

Felipe Fernández-Armesto: *Food: A History*. Macmillan, 2001: ISBN 0 333901746: 287pp., b/w illus., index, h/b, £20.00.

Felipe Fernández-Armesto is an historian of culture, and accordingly, produced *Food: A History* as 'a sort of spin-off' from another work. This statement is bound to irritate those who suspect that world history is actually a theme of food history. It suggests leftovers, re-heating and crumbs.

So what is offered? Fernández-Armesto states his aims clearly. They include: offering a useful alternative to previous food history books; a global perspective; considering food history as a theme of world history; combining broad survey with selective detail; tracing connections between the past and present, and to be brief. The last is certainly achieved. Here is one history of food which can be taken on a 'plane without paying excess baggage charges; but is brevity desirable in a book which aims at to be global?

Within these aims, the author traces eight major 'revolutions' relating to cooking, eating, animal breeding, plant management, status, trade, ecology and industrialization. The approach provides some interesting views (as opposed to the frameworks of time, product or place more commonly adopted) but arguments sometimes feel rushed. The author's aim of being global is reasonably well fulfilled, but emphasis is inevitably on Eurasia and north America. Africa and Japan get little attention, although it is not clear if this is because source material is inaccessible or simply doesn't exist. Discussions home in on subjects as disparate as snail farming, Dutch activities in Indonesia during the seventeenth century, and the development of modern strains of wheat. The summaries are frequently exhilarating but closer examination reveals problems with detail: examples include the assertion that Fry's was a York company; an apparent incomprehension of the logic behind enriching margarine with vitamin A, and, more seriously, a discussion on cheese-making in which 'lactose' has slipped in place of 'lactase'.

Sometimes Fernández-Armesto's own prejudices, such as a dislike of cooked oysters, interfere. As a gastronome, he may not see why anyone should cook oysters, but as a historian writing about food he should point out that they were once a ubiquitous and rather unsafe poverty food. There are signs of hurried editing, which in places make nonsense – surely 'transition', not 'tradition' is intended in a discussion of plant transfers across the Pacific. And his upbeat conclusion about revitalization of artisan production is at odds with a statement about

vigorous food franchising in north America. It is not clear how some of the illustrations relate to the text, nor is the index as useful as one might hope.

Anyone who takes the slightest interest in food history discovers that one is always chasing more bits of background on culture, economics or science. New perspectives, especially from authors with backgrounds which are not French or Anglocentric, should be full of interest. It is a shame then, that personal prejudices have intruded and synthesis shows signs of having been achieved at the expense of accuracy, making this book of less use than it should be.

LAURA MASON