

## BOOK REVIEWS

Peter Heine: *Food Culture in the Near East, Middle East and North Africa*: ISBN 0313329567: 181 pp.

Colleen Taylor Sen: *Food Culture in India*: ISBN 0313324875: 197 pp.

Fabio Parasecoli: *Food Culture in Italy*: ISBN 0313327262: 229 pp.

Jacqueline M. Newman: *Food Culture in China*: ISBN 0313325812: 230 pp.

Laura Mason: *Food Culture in Great Britain*: ISBN 031332798X: 238 pp.

The Series Editor is Ken Albala of the University of the Pacific; the publisher is Greenwood Press, CT ([www.greenwood.com](http://www.greenwood.com)), the books are distributed in England (priced £28) via Greenwood Publishing, P.O. Box 384 Halley Court, Jordan Hill, Oxford OX2 8RY.

This series has been produced as a basic tool for food studies scholars, for individuals interested in food and for general readers. Each volume contains a neat collection of facts and opinions, kitchen lore and eating habits. Information is nicely compartmentalized in each volume and provides an account of the kitchen history, the food resources available and the cultural results of these in the homes of the countries studied. I found little to argue with in those volumes covering China, India, Italy and the Middle East.

Also included in each text are simple recipes that illustrate various dishes commonly eaten in family kitchens and these are helpful in enabling the reader to understand the ease with which most ethnic food can be prepared. Too often, access to what is essentially peasant food is made difficult for the common cook. Some recipe books are written by authors who do not prepare the dishes regularly in their own kitchens. Others simply retell recipes garnered from a restaurant or on a travel assignment. Thus needless elaborations and inaccuracies occur and are perpetuated and this puts off all but the most dedicated common cook from attempting to make what are in reality simple dishes.

The volume, *Food Culture in Great Britain*, presented me with some difficulty in reviewing it. On first reading it was informative but somehow out of date. The impression given of British food consumers is of a population that remains timid and insular where food is concerned, hankering after a long abandoned Sunday roast, devoted to sliced white bread and potatoes in spite of the influence of food-passionate ethnic minorities and the determination of supermarkets to infiltrate exotic foreign goods into the nation's microwaves and stomachs. In saying this, however, I remind myself that no people are more timid about the food of other cultures than Italians..... unless it is Indians.

The statistics provided came mainly from various institutions and

government agencies and perhaps this is the reason for the gap between what was written and what I myself know from my experience of British food, from the food of British friends, and what I read and hear every day in the British media.

There is little doubt that food culture in Great Britain is in a state of flux. Lurching from wartime austerity to the abundance of industrially prepared convenience foods originating from marketing think-tanks obsessed with providing novelty, the British eater seems confused and quite unable to pinpoint a truly British identity for what they eat. Of course, there is the English Breakfast – more observed in the breach of imagination and yearning than the reality of every morning.

The person who cooks the food is the vital factor in what we eat. In other cultures, the ability to cook and to understand the very soul of kitchen culture is highly prized and both women and men are proud to flaunt this skill. The historical role of the cook in British culture has waxed and waned in status depending on the class of the household. In recent times the reluctance of the 'lady of the house', let alone the man of the house, to take on the chore of preparing daily meals must be partly to blame for the difficulty in defining a recognizably British food culture. In much of Britain the food is eaten on the run and consists of a rag-bag of industrialized American, ethnic and pseudo-traditional products – it may be that this is the food culture of Britain, but not one to be proud of.

In one area, however, British food culture is sound and strong. This is in the force with which many eaters criticize the production, transport and marketing of food. It is often due to British critics and the British investigative media that risks to health from bad farming practice, the poor nutritional quality of industrialized convenience foods, substandard hygiene, price fixing and the truly deleterious effects on nutrition of globalization of food products are brought to the consciousness of the often ignorant consumer. It is also due to this critical analysis of food in Britain that many of the outrages perpetrated on British stomachs are checked and beneficial changes forced on unscrupulous merchants and lazy government agencies. More power to them.

Forget the celebrity chefs and the foodies, they may enlarge our imaginations about the possibilities of *recherché* dishes but fighters for better daily food are what we need. It is a pity that the Food Culture series does not place more emphasis on encouraging the students, scholars and general readers for whom the books are written to pose awkward questions, to study what happens to plants, fruit and vegetables from seed to supermarket, to dig into how we feed and treat our animals and what happens before they appear on the plate in front of us.

The growth of food studies in the West is to be applauded but it would be a pity if scholars limited themselves to delving into little ponds of kitchen and restaurant history. Food culture is dynamic. Great dangers menace our future and we need the force of intellect to lead the way in the fight for a food culture we can be proud of. These books provide us with a start in understanding what food culture is all about – as an introduction they should be read by initiates into the food game and perhaps they will lead to greater participation in the politics of food culture and its challenges.

LYNNE CHATTERTON

Since Lynne Chatterton kindly supplied her report of the Greenwood Press series, two further volumes have arrived:

Janet Long-Solís and Luis Alberto Vargas: *Food Culture in Mexico*: ISBN 031332431X:194pp.

F. Xavier Medina: *Food Culture in Spain*: ISBN 0313328196:169 pp.

My inspection of these confirms what has been said above. They are essentially student textbooks, so detail is light, brush strokes broad, useful truths sometimes buried out of sight beneath a pile of generalities. The English is not too hot either: the translation of the Spanish volume is particularly halting.

Daniel E Moerman: *Native American Ethnobotany*: Timber Press: ISBN 0881924539: 927pp, \$ 79.95.

Although first published in Oregon in 1998, Moerman's book on Red Indian plant-use has only just arrived here. There was no real hurry, it isn't likely to be bettered in my lifetime or even that of my grandchildren. The author's research over a quarter of a century has culminated in descriptions of 4,029 kinds of plants, used in 186 different ways by 291 tribal societies. Not surprisingly there is no room here for charts, maps nor virtually any pictures (though Moerman's daughter does get a credit for the illustrations) but for those who can't cope with the lack of visual stimulation I strongly recommend reading it in conjunction with an old copy of 'Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee'. This does contain pictures and a map and those who once wept with rage and embarrassment at Dee Brown's story of US ethnic cleansing will weep anew; for whereas Brown described the virtual annihilation of an entire ethnic grouping, Moerman details the culture that was flushed down the pan with it. A process which started before and continued long after the 'Indian Wars'.

The 'Food Plant' category is split into thirty two subdivisions con-