

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-

taining 1,649 plants. Some of these, strawberries for instance, are universally enjoyed and others, like those members of the genus *Rhus* employed for beverages, are comparatively well known. Less familiar are the long lists of starvation and substitution foods only eaten when other plant material was unavailable. These bear sad testament to the excruciatingly hard life lived by the North Americans even before they were packed off on the appalling 'trails of tears' pursuant to the Indian Removal Act of 1830.

However, such is Moerman's determination to omit nothing that I am slightly sceptical about some of the practices he lists. I can understand perhaps that wolves have such a strong dislike of the sound of willows being swished that they will leave the area where this is done, but I do wonder at the frequency with which a dose of convolvulus was necessitated by the Navajo accidentally ingesting spiders. I am irresistibly reminded of the occasions on which I have been questioned by one of those irritatingly earnest TV interviewers and come up with a really daft answer to see if she will broadcast it.

The seemingly endless food lists give rise to speculation on why, since every ethnic food on the planet seems to have a restaurant devoted to its worship somewhere in Lower Manhattan, have I never found a Red Indian one. It can't be that we massacred all their buffaloes nor that their food is so foul that no one would walk down the same side of the street, let alone go through the door. I agree that Scots lovage in seal oil does have a somewhat limited appeal, but if the Scots lovage was accompanied by wild salmon with onion bread, preceded by chestnut soup and followed by bearberry ice cream you would have an authentic meal (admittedly derived from several tribal sources) infinitely less revolting than most sold in road-side diners everywhere. My personal view is that the obsessively Christian early settlers had a deep distrust of anything used by 'savages'. Inevitably, the most prejudiced soon starved, but sufficient numbers of their descendents survived to carry the enforced Christianization of Indian children through to our own times. The result was the loss of respect for what remained of their native heritage. As far as promoting their own food is concerned, the lack of a good Indian spin-doctor is all too apparent, with so many vegetables being described as laxative, cathartic or emetic, but then most of the foods we eat in our own society would have similar effects if consumed to excess on an empty stomach. Also, there was a troubling lack of consistency in usage, the Iroquois for instance happily ate caltha with peas and pepper – but the Abnaki sensibly avoided it as poisonous. Moerman points out that we, too, use poisonous plants homeopathically which we would never

otherwise dream of eating. All the same, one wonders how little caltha the Iroquois must have eaten to avoid the stomach pains of the more adventurous (or gluttonous) Abnaki. Even the hungriest settlers surely had similar misgivings. Curiously, this lack of cross-cultural diffusion is not all one-sided. Although used everywhere between the Middle East and Britain since the Middle Ages, the Indians never seem to have caught on to how delicious barberries are: preferring to restrict their use to treating throat problems and jaundice

Although Moerman allows few glimmers of his own personality to show through in his intensely objective study, there is sufficient to reveal a deeply caring man with a delicate sense of humour, in fact so caring is he that he is distributing as many copies of his book as funds allow to tribes where it is otherwise too late. The content of his work is probably beyond criticism and given its altruistic inspiration, it seems churlish to quibble, however it must be said that it does follow the fashionable and infuriating trend of dividing its information into separate chunks. I found that explaining the food usage categories on page 21 before detailing them on page 832 deeply irritating, similarly, the schedule of Indian tribes is split off from how they actually employed their herbs by no less than 622 pages, so that one has to keep a finger between one set of pages whilst turning to the other end of the book for corroboration.

And finally to the 'Red Indians' themselves, Moerman doesn't duck the issue of what we should call them. As he says, any name is bound to upset some political group somewhere, but they were Red Indians when they were building the Chicago skyscrapers and they still had some dignity when they were having shoot-outs with John Wayne. It would be facile to argue that they only became whiskey-raddled Casino-owners after patronizing do-gooders renamed them 'Native Americans', but it was certainly around this time that they finally lost it. We all owe Moerman an enormous debt for recording their vast and largely oral culture in the nick of time. And after the Western infrastructure has finally been reduced to rubble by a few bombs, ask yourself who you would rather have standing beside you, George 'Burger' Bush or a squaw who may or may not have read Moerman's book.

I should point that I have no axe to grind, Indians in Massachusetts stole my great-(x12)-grandfather's cattle in 1632 – leaving him to starve – and the family was no more Christian in those days than it is now!

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