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Ken Albala. *Food in Early Modern Europe.* Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2003. xvii + 260 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-31962-4.

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Food For Thought

In the acknowledgements with which he opens his 2003 study, *Food in Early Modern Europe*, author Ken Albala claims that his book was "an absolute ball to write" (p. vii). I can only echo Albala's sentiment by noting that his work is also a pleasure to read. Providing much food for thought, Albala's study serves as a compendium that should be of great practical value both to food historians in need of concise reference works for their undergraduate courses and to anyone new to the field of Food Studies.

In clear prose with a conscience avoidance of scholarly jargon, Albala's text provides a solid overview of Western European food history from 1500 to 1800 with a clear focus on the early modern period. As he states in his introduction, this work is not geared at scholars who already have a solid grounding in food history or at specialist seeking specific information but rather at a "nonspecialist audience of students and the general public" (p. xvi). Thus he acknowledges that "historians will miss the lack of meticulous notes" and fellow food scholars will "miss the precision" that comes with the use of specialized language (p. xvi-xvii). These claims are certainly true, yet Albala's generalist approach by no means negates his overall contribution to the field. Drawing on the work of some of our era's foremost food historians such as Jean-Louis Flandrin, Massimo Montanari, Stephen Mennell, Jean-FranÃ§ois Revel, Wolfgang Schivelbusch, Rebecca L. Spang, Reay Tannahill and Margaret Visser to name only a handful, Albala has created an accessible, easy-to-use reference work for the general public which represents a rigorous synthesis of cultural and historical information and contemporary scholarship.[1]

In terms of organization, Albala prefaces his study with a timeline delineating some of the era's most important food-historical events from Columbus's discovery of the New World in 1492 to the opening of the first Parisian restaurants in the 1760s. His individual chapters, however, are not organized chronologically but rather begin "with the raw materials" (p. xvii) and proceed onward to larger ideas about cuisine and culture. In his opening chapter, "Food and People," Albala tackles the issue of understanding "how food was grown and how it ultimately reached the consumer" (p. 1). Through a general discussion of issues such as population growth, agriculture, land tenures, trade and colonial empires, Albala illuminates some of the crucial demographic and economic factors influencing the Western European diet during the early modern era. Additionally, by providing straightforward definitions of potentially confusing terms such as "seigneurialism" (p. 3), "mercantilism" (pp. 16-17), or "bullionist" (p. 17), Albala artfully simplifies complex economic issues for the uninitiated.

In his second chapter, "Ingredients," Albala provides a detailed listing of common foodstuffs, seasonings and beverages available to early modern eaters. While some ingredients, such as the potato, are still integral parts of present-day cuisine, others such as dormice and vetches have disappeared completely from European tables. With each entry, Albala provides a brief description of the ingredient, its origin and customary preparation and any additional historical information of interest. The entry on musk and amber, for example, includes the following information: "Although technically an animal product, extracted from the scent glands of several species of deer found in Siberia, musk is a powerful aromatic now used mostly in perfumes, but in the past a culinary ingredient as well. DragÃ©es, or candies scented

with musk, were popular, as were pies and other savory dishes scented with musk. Amber, or rather ambergris (not the stone), was a similar aromatic extracted from sperm whales found washed up on shore, and was one of the most expensive things that could be incorporated into food with the exception of pearls and gold" (p. 48).

After detailing both the exotic and commonplace ingredients of the early modern table, Albala moves into his next chapter on "Cooking and the Food Professions." Here he describes various cooking procedures such as roasting, stewing, poaching, pickling, drying and baking along with a description of culinary equipment and utensils. In this section, we learn, for example, that "many cups, mugs and steins were covered, usually with a metal domed cap connected by a hinge. This was probably of great use in keeping away flies, which apparently in poorer households was done with a slice of toast, hence the origin to drinking 'toasts' to someone's health" (p. 105). Albala then ends his chapter with a brief discussion of food service professionals, the culinary guild system and the various dining establishments dotting the early modern gastronomic landscape such as cookshops, street vendors, inns, caterers and restaurants.

Perhaps the most engaging aspect of Albala's study is his chapter on "Cuisine By Region" in which he breaks down the cuisine of Western Europe into individual countries while carefully avoiding the pitfalls of overgeneralizing. As he writes, "the very idea of a nation-state first emerged in this period, and to suggest that everyone throughout a country, from every social class, ate the same foods prepared in similar ways would be false. The idea of regional foods comes a bit closer to the truth, but even then rich and poor had radically different diets. In the end one must say there were cuisines based on class with regional variations which were sometimes adopted on a wider scale and at times associated with a particular nationality by outsiders" (p. 115). Thus Albala concedes that his discussion, extracted from cookbooks of the era, concerns itself primarily with the diet of the upper classes since "elite cuisine is all most cookbooks record. Sometimes they offer a glimpse of ordinary eating, but in the end, this story is primarily about courtly cooking" (p. 115).

In his regional breakdown, Albala pays special attention to the cuisines of Italy, France, England, Spain and Portugal while providing only brief summaries of the culinary traditions of The Netherlands and Germany. This omission is disappointing as it is also typical of the majority of European food histories available today, and anyone truly interested in an overview of food history in The Netherlands or Germany especially, will need to search significantly farther afield. Despite this shortcoming, Albala provides an informative discussion of the political and cultural developments that influenced diet in each country or region. In doing so, he puts the numerous recipes he cites into an informative and convincing historical context, and in this way, Albala's work serves not only as an introductory food history but also as a refresher course for the major events of Western European history in the early modern period.

After his overview of specific European cuisines, Albala concludes his book with three chapters dedicated to cultural ideas about food. In "Religion and Food," Albala looks at the influence of major religious milestones such as the Protestant and Catholic Reformations as well as general rituals of feasting and fasting and Jewish food traditions. The chapter on "Diet and Nutrition" looks at various theories of nutrition and their effects on the human body such as humoral pathology, Paraclesian chemistry and iatromechanics. In his final chapter on food in literature, Albala provides a brief discussion of the way in which literary texts also serve as valuable sources for information on "eating habits and attitudes toward food" (p. 231).

In conclusion, *Food in Early Modern Europe* provides a useful introductory overview that should serve as a model of scholarship for anyone interested in food-historical narratives, regardless of the time period or region. It is an excellent reference work, equipped with rigorous subject and recipe indexes as well as a detailed biography arranged according to chapters. Obviously the nature of the undertaking and Albala's intended purpose to write for students and the general public means that food historians and seasoned scholars will find his work to be too broad and superficial for their immediate purposes. If historians accept the book on its own terms, however, what awaits them is a concisely written and rigorously researched tour of European eating that is not only an excellent reference tool for students but also a springboard for continued scholarship.

Note

[1]. Jean-Lousis Flandrin and Massimo Montanari, *Food: A Culinary History*, trans. Albert Sonnenfeld (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Stephen Mennell, *All Manners of Food* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985); Jean-Francois Revel, *Culture and Cuisine*, trans. Helen R. Lane (New York: Da Capo, 1982); Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Tastes of Paradise*, trans. David Jacobson (New York:

Vintage, 1993); Rebecca L. Spang, *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Reay Tannahill, *Food in History* (New York: Crown, 1988); Margaret Visser, *Much Depends on Dinner* (New York: Grove Press, 1986).

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