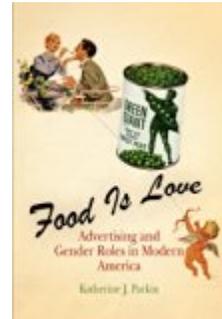


Katherine J. Parkin. *Food is Love: Advertising and Gender Roles in Modern America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. 296 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8122-1992-0.

Reviewed by Joshua C. Davis (Department of History, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)

Published on H-Amstyd (February, 2008)



Food is Love (and Maybe Also Power)

In the past two decades, American Studies scholars have recognized that food studies offers them a fresh perspective to consider in their multidisciplinary analysis of U.S. society and culture. Publications on topics as diverse as fast food, slow food, the food of immigrants, and even the “history of the future of food” are only a few of the entries in this ever-growing discipline, but gender, perhaps more than any other topic within food studies, has generated robust scholarship, as numerous edited collections and monographs by Sherrie Inness, Laura Shapiro, and Jessamyn Neuhaus demonstrate. Katherine J. Parkin’s *Food is Love: Advertising and Gender Roles in Modern America* is the most recent work to examine the connection between women and food in the United States.[1]

Parkin’s contribution to scholars’ understanding of the relationship between food and gender is twofold. First, *Food is Love* is the rare historical monograph that addresses the relationship between gender and food in the United States during the entire twentieth century. Second, Parkin’s work is a thorough assessment of the U.S. advertising industry’s concerted efforts to convince consumers that “food preparation is a gender-specific activity and that women should shop and cook for others in order to express their love” (p. 1).

Parkin focuses her energies on interpreting food advertisements from women’s magazines, most notably *Ladies’ Home Journal*, and shows how advertisers sold not only edible products, but also the idea that a woman’s primary obligation in life was to be a good cook and

homemaker. Women, and only women, were duty-bound to please others and to show their love for their families by buying and preparing food for them. Although the ranks of copywriters overwhelmingly consisted of men, advertisers were little interested in male consumers and believed that only women really enjoyed consuming food. As is the case with many products, food advertisements played on women’s insecurities in the hopes of convincing them that their product would protect its users from personal failings.

Food is Love demonstrates, however, that food ads were unusual in just how many kinds of insecurities they manipulated, including women’s anxieties about body image, class status, propriety, health, and their performance as mothers and wives. A single ad could suggest, for example, that a woman who failed to choose the best brand of bread for her family risked being an uncaring wife and mother, who served unhealthy food with empty calories, and whose working-class palate revealed a lack of sophistication. Yet, if women bought the right foods and served them with love, advertisers told them, their husbands and children would love them in return for it. Food advertisers were eager to tie their products to a range of positive causes and attributes, including patriotism (especially in times of war), women’s suffrage (in a 1922 appeal for Campbell’s Soup), worldliness (in the case of Asian-and European-themed foods), and of course, good looks and slim bodies that supposedly resulted from “eating right.”

Parkin's most valuable finding is that for all the dramatic changes in American women's lives in the areas of marriage, wage labor, childbearing, and reproductive rights in the twentieth century, food advertisers refused to concede what many Americans had gradually come to recognize, namely that both men and women were able and willing to buy and prepare food. Even at the end of the twentieth century, advertisers who strove to avoid the appearance of promoting gender roles still demonstrated a persistent, if somewhat subtle, reluctance to acknowledge women's dual burden of working in and outside the home.

There is much to praise in *Food is Love*. Parkin has unearthed a wealth of vivid, revealing, and often (unintentionally) amusing food advertisements, and her analysis of these visual texts is persuasive and free of theoretical jargon. An advertisement for soup declaring "[w]hen a man knows it's good ... it's good" (p. 128), or another that shows a husband holding an empty cereal box and scolding his wife, "*Mother* never ran out of Kellogg's Corn Flakes" (pp. 134-136), are among Parkin's most convincing examples of advertisers' promotion of female subservience in the kitchen and at the grocery store. The author's exhaustive research in the files in Duke University's J. Walter Thompson Co. Archives, as well as her reading of hundreds of issues of *Ladies Home Journal*, lend her work a commendable empirical rigor. And for readers who might doubt the relevance of food advertisements to broader social and cultural currents of the United States, Parkin connects her main subject to an impressive range of key developments in the twentieth century, including Progressivism, immigration, the World Wars, and the social movements of the 1960s and '70s.

Still, in spite of this lengthy list of virtues, *Food is Love* leaves readers wondering what female consumers, the subject and target of advertisements, thought of their own relationship to food, love, and power. As Parkin points out in passing, the kitchen "was one of the few places women had authority in American culture prior to the 1970s" (p. 56), but this idea is far overshadowed

in *Food is Love* by advertisers' message that "women were subservient to men and should cater to their needs" (p. 9). Indeed, advertisement after advertisement declared that women were bound to buy and prepare food for their families, but men were portrayed frequently as helpless and inept when it came to feeding themselves, and some ads even displayed "an explicitly insulting attitude towards men's cooking abilities" (p. 149). Even women who did concur with advertisers' ideology of gender-specific duties may have also believed that a certain power came with the responsibility to cook. *Food is Love* would have benefited from more voices of women who bought groceries and cooked, if only to complement the messages of male advertisers.

In conclusion, *Food is Love* is a lively and compelling study and is highly recommended for those interested in advertising's key role in shaping public discourse regarding the interplay of food, gender roles, and consumption in twentieth-century U.S. society and culture.

Note

[1]. George Ritzer, ed., *McDonaldization: The Reader* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Pine Forge Press, 2006); Donna R. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); Warren Belasco, *Meals to Come: A History of the Future of Food* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Sherrie A. Inness, *Dinner Roles: American Women and Culinary Culture* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001); Jessamyn Neuhaus, *Manly Meals and Mom's Home Cooking: Cookbooks and Gender in Modern America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2003); Laura Shapiro, *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1986); Arlene Voski Avakian and Barbara Haber, eds., *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies: Critical Perspectives on Women and Food* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005). On advertisers' conscious efforts to promote gender roles, see Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women* (New York: W. Morrow, 1991).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-amstdy>

Citation: Joshua C. Davis. Review of Parkin, Katherine J., *Food is Love: Advertising and Gender Roles in Modern America*. H-Amstdy, H-Net Reviews. February, 2008.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14208>

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.