

Helen Zoe Veit. *Modern Food, Moral Food: Self-Control, Science, and the Rise of Modern American Eating in the Early Twentieth Century.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. 300 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-0770-2.



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In *Modern Food, Moral Food: Self-Control, Science, and the Rise of Modern American Eating in the Early Twentieth Century*, historian Helen Zoe Veit invites readers to consider the Progressive Era and therefore progressivism as the impetus for a sea change in Americans' relationships with food. As in so many other areas of American life—hygiene, sanitation, education—progressives promoted rational ways of knowing as right and moral. The self-discipline required for adherence to the vision of food as a tool rather than an instrument of pleasure facilitated the institution and installation of reforms, experts, and bureaucracy concerning food.

Scholars compelled by the particularities of progressivism, its legacies, and its intersections with gender, race, politics, and food will find themselves engaged by Veit's easy prose and thorough archival research. She contributes to both food and progressive histories through her mining of the over 380,000 letters sent to the federal Food Administration in the 1910s in conjunction with press clippings collected on behalf of the

Food Administration from 1917 to 1919. She acknowledges the self-selecting nature of her evidence yet argues that despite their limits, the letters paint a national portrait of the development of a mainstream, popularized American cuisine. Furthermore, Veit claims, the letters offer "ordinary" people a voice in this facet of the progressive narrative not previously afforded them (p. 9).

Modern Food, Moral Food emphasizes the bequests of national progressivism through seven chapters that address the politicization of food during World War I, the revolution of nutrition science, food conservation and international aid as expressions of American political power, the relationship of home economics and therefore domesticity to progressivism, diet and environment in regard to racial development, the Americanization of (some) immigrant foods, and the aspiration of thinness as an embodiment of the self-control promoted by progressivism. In chapter 1, Veit sets the stage for the crafting of an American cuisine through the Food Administration during World War I. She contends that voluntary conservation

and rationing was one of the primary ways Americans experienced the war, unlike in World War II when such measures were mandatory. Here Veit describes the self-control necessary for such culinary restraint as “a kind of bridge between desires for free, democratic cooperation and desires for the perceived power and efficiency of autocracy” (p. 35).

In the following chapter, Veit continues her analysis of progressive sentiment and food through an exploration of the reign of rational eating as it developed from nutritional science. As a perhaps extreme example, she points to one authority’s advocacy of eating cats and dogs during World War I. Though the practice never really caught on, such promotions reinforced the progressive penchant for divorcing pleasure from food consumption. Another contribution of this chapter involves Veit’s assessment of nutrition education as primarily the purview of middle-class women, whom, like in other areas of domestic life, many positioned as uniquely qualified to learn and apply nutritional expertise to the family table.

Returning to specific war efforts, Veit examines the moral component of food attitudes through American food aid programs during World War I in chapter 3. She acknowledges the limits of food aid as a white, Western phenomenon (as indeed was much of progressivism). According to Veit, the Food Administration succeeded in presenting food aid as a “moral accomplishment” while simultaneously establishing the United States as a global political powerhouse (p. 60).

In chapter 4, she aligns the modern middle-class wife with education in home economics. Like nutrition education, the science of the domestic sphere gave women a job of national importance while tethering them to the national naturalization of their unpaid labor. While in this chapter she diverts her attention somewhat from a discussion of food, Veit argues that the image of the modern “housewife” as educated and empow-

ered accompanied the progressive, scientific, rational basis of American attitudes toward food (p. 96).

Veit delves into the relationships between race, gender, and food in chapter 5. While scholars of the Progressive Era have encountered eugenics, her discussion of eugenics proves one of the most significant contributions of the book. As in the progressive pursuit of sanitation of city streets, milk, and dance halls, the discipline of eugenics, which focused on hygiene, food, and domestic skills, recognized the effects of the environment on people’s physical and mental development. Therefore, theoretically, African Americans could affect change by following a particular American diet, an assertion that defied persistent beliefs in the hierarchy of races. In this chapter, Veit also addresses the elevation of corn as an especially American starch, from its lowly position as a symbol of poverty and southernness.

Chapter 6 further discusses the Americanization of cuisine through the adoption and adaptation of certain immigrant foods as American. Veit shows the slipperiness of the designation of “foreign” regarding food as well as the impossibility, if not futility, of locating the origins and reasons for shifts in the acceptance of particular foods. More specifics on the content of the recipes would have enriched her position.

Finally, Veit completes her survey of American food, morality, and modernity with analysis of the emergence of the ideal of “thinness” as a progressive proposition. Bringing the opening chapter’s emphasis on self-control full circle, she presents the language of willpower and discipline concerning weight management as also connected with the proliferation of scientific research that blamed fat for health problems and provided parameters for a healthy figure.

Veit succeeds in illuminating the changes in Americans’ relationship with food in the early twentieth century and also provides the foundation for further inquiry on the topic. For example,

how did the trends of rationing and conservation play out locally? What other factors of earlier, more provincially focused progressivism contributed to a national vision of American cuisine? How did the emergence of the American diet inform the conceptualization of American identity? Lastly, did all groups welcome the Americanization of diet? In what ways did people challenge the perceived authenticity of certain foods as “American”? Overall Veit deftly covers a breadth of topics to demonstrate the paradigm shift of American attitudes toward food from pleasure to the promotion of discipline for the benefit of both self and country. Her analysis of Progressive Era food habits shows the persistence of many sentiments and practices today, which helps us comprehend current American feelings about food.

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