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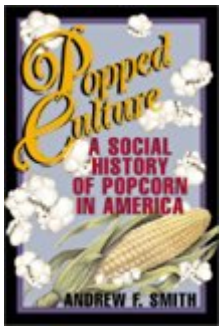
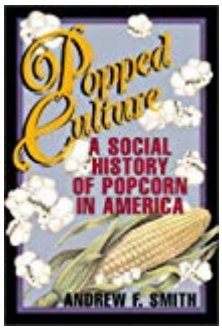
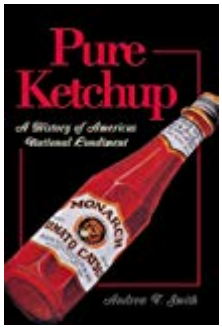


Virginia Scott Jenkins. *Bananas: An American History.* Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000. xiii + 210 pp. $16.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-56098-966-0.



Andrew F. Smith. *Popped Culture: A Social History of Popcorn in America.* Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001. xxi + 264 pp. $16.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-56098-921-9.



Andrew F. Smith. *Pure Ketchup: A History of America's National Condiment.* Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001. xiii + 242 pp. $16.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-56098-993-6.

Reviewed by Trudy Eden

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Food history, like all historical fields, has had its active and dormant periods. Historians in the first part of the twentieth century explored it avidly. Many of them sought to give an expansive view of the cultivation, distribution, preparation, and/or consumption of a particular product. Examples of this type of macro-view history include Edward R. Everson, ***Beverages, Past and Present*** (1908), William J. Ashley, ***The Bread of Our Forefathers*** (1928), and William G. Panscher, ***Baking in America*** (1956). While providing an understanding of food supplies, practices, and habits over long chronological periods and broad geographical spaces, these texts come up against a major impediment to in-depth analysis. For much of human history, food has been a local thing. People

have grown and distributed much of their food supply locally and have prepared and consumed it according to local custom. This tendency does not mean that local customs cannot be compared and classified in a larger context--there *are* such things as "French cuisine" and "British food" (to use the problem addressed by Stephen Mennell in *All Manners of Food* [1985]), but within each of those categories there exists a universe of variety and meaning. While it is important to understand the larger picture, the drawback of many such studies is that they miss the sociological, chronological and geographical variety in the enterprise of eating.

Take, for example's sake, the subject of eating pork. If one only looks at pork in a general way, then it is correct to state that people ate pork heartily in America in 1650 and in 1850 and in 2003. However, who ate pork (the social distribution among men and women, the wealthy, poor, black, white, Asian, native American, etc.), what parts of the hog each of those people ate (baby back ribs, tenderloin, chops, hot dogs, or fried rinds), how they prepared it (roasted, barbecued, boiled, pickled), how they consumed it (appetizer, main course, snack, as a roast or steak, stripped and stir fried, or pulled), and what they threw or gave away (to other people or animals for food, or as trash) cannot be adequately analyzed in the broad view. (Nor can why people chose to eat pork in the first place.) Is it because they thought it tasted good or was good for them? Was it because pork was cheap or, perhaps, expensive? If the answer to any one of these questions is yes, then one must ask "why?" If the answer is no, then the next question is "why not?"

Cognizant of these shortcomings, historians of more recent date have focused their attentions on specifics, most frequently on a particular foodstuff. In the past two decades, numerous analyses have been written on topics such as sugar, maize, potatoes, salt, chocolate popcorn, ketchup, and bananas.[1] These studies can be as exclusive as the former are inclusive. In other words, they overlook context for detail. Of course, not all studies can do all things and food history needs both such approaches, but cognizance and consideration of related scholarship on food and food habits is desperately needed. The history of American food has not only come of age as a valid academic field, it also has enough substance for a lengthy and complex historiography. It is time for more of its practitioners to incorporate that historiography into their studies. In other words, ketchup, popcorn, and bananas not only can go together, they should, even must, go together. Here's why.

Andrew Smith's intention in writing ***Popped Culture: A Social History of Popcorn in America*** is to tell the story of the origin of popcorn in Anglo-American culture and why "the mainstream embraced it" and "enshrined [it] in our national mythology." In doing so, he vowed to disprove the "myths and twice-told tales" that he felt made up the bulk of popcorn history at the time he researched and wrote the book (p. xvii). Popcorn, like other types of maize, originated in Central America. One of six kinds of maize, it had small kernels with extremely hard seed coats which made it difficult to chew or grind into flour. Although each ear of corn had lots of kernels, they were small, which made it more labor-intensive than other varieties of maize. In addition, like other types of maize, popcorn hybridizes easily and so it had to be grown in isolation. As a result, it was not an important food crop among the Native American cultures that grew it or among Anglo-American culture.

By the 1820s, however, seed companies began to feature popcorn varieties in their catalogs, though whether due to supply or demand Smith does not make clear. By the 1840s, popping corn entertained many Americans, most of them, it seems, in New England. Popcorn companies began marketing the seeds for consumption in the 1860s and a decade later it was a "much relished food" (p. 24), predominantly among the middle

and upper classes. After the Civil War, Americans could and did consume popcorn at fairs, circuses and expositions. They ate it plain and as a confection like popcorn balls. By the 1890s, due to the expanded technology of moveable commercial popcorn poppers, Americans could buy freshly made popcorn from street vendors. Limited and short-term use was made of popcorn flour as a cooked cereal eaten with milk and sugar and as a coagulant in commercially prepared chocolates, but these uses were minor in comparison to the others.

The advent of radio advertising helped boost popcorn sales, as did the sale of it by initially reluctant movie theater owners, who thought offering it to their customers "beneath their dignity" (p. 100). During the Depression, however, when they realized that not only would popcorn attract customers to their theaters, and that they could make a whopping profit from its sale, they gave up their scruples about noisy eaters and messy floors and gladly offered it. Up until the 1950s, most of the popcorn consumed in the United States was prepared and eaten outside the home, half of it in movie theaters. When television supplanted movies as a major form of entertainment in the 1950s and 1960s, popcorn producers and marketers had to scramble to retain their markets and get people to fix and eat it at home. Home appliances such as the electric corn popper, and heavy marketing of the great compatibility of popcorn with television, helped spur sale greatly. As Smith said, this effort "establish[ed] popcorn as part of the television ritual" (p. 122).

Popcorn sales increased even more, aided by successful hybridization for disease resistance, increased productivity, and improved size after popping. The invention of the mechanical harvester reduced the amount of human labor required. In addition, new markets opened with spread of the U.S. Army, first in Great Britain during World War II, then in Korea and later in Japan. By the 1970s and later, convenience popcorn products such as "Jiffy Pop," microwave popcorn, hot air poppers, and pre-popped popcorn all helped shore up the market as did Orville Redenbacher's introduction of gourmet popcorn, and the American obsession for low-fat, high carbohydrate foods. Ironically, this obsession cut dramatically into popcorn sales at movie theaters when scientists released a study that showed that a large container of buttered popcorn, which was more than likely cooked in coconut or palm oil, contained as much fat as eight Big Macs.

This story is an interesting one. Smith accomplished his goal of presenting a documented history of popcorn that dispels some of the cultural legends around it. He has compiled an extensive bibliography on its cultivation, use, and marketing. He is not so successful with his second goal, that of explaining why Americans have embraced popcorn in the way and to the extent they have. In fact, he leaves the reader wondering whether popcorn was simply a tool of our budding capitalist society to make money off a responsive public, or whether consumer demand drove the market, or whether it was a combination of both depending on the time period and place. If it was demand, why did consumers want it? What was it about the combination of white fluff, crunch, and vegetable that made it so desirable? Was it one of the many items Americans embraced in their determined quest, a la Richard Bushman, for refinement?[2] Did it have more to do with the impact of industrialization on family mealtimes, the rearrangement of leisure time, or the adoption of snack foods? Could nutritionists, whose nineteenth-century mantra was fats, protein, and carbohydrates have influenced its success?

The same questions could be asked of ketchup, the subject of Smith's other book under review here, ***Pure Ketchup: A History of America's National Condiment***. Unlike with popcorn, English immigrants in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries brought with them a habit of eating pickled and fermented sauces along with their

meats. Those ketchups, however, were made primarily of walnuts, mushrooms, oysters, and fish, not tomatoes. Tomato ketchups were not popular until the nineteenth century when it became, like popcorn, "the rage." Recipes for tomato ketchups were in all the major American cookbooks by the 1830s, a sign for Smith that it had become a staple food item. The reason for tomato ketchup's popularity, and indeed all ketchups, was because they lasted a long time, one recipe claiming that its particular formula would last up to five years. Ketchup fit easily into the commercialization of the canning industry and, like popcorn, was a ready tool for marketers.

The first ketchup bottlers appeared in the northeast United States in the 1820s. Soon, factories spread around the United States, each offering its own secret combination of tomatoes, vinegar, sweetener, and spices. The H. J. Heinz company dominated the ketchup industry by the 1890s and ketchup itself became the "national condiment" during that time (p. 50). Smith sees this popularity as part of the larger trend of increased canned tomato consumption in this country (ketchup was made from the rejected tomatoes and leftover trimmings of prime tomatoes) and because of its versatility in providing color and flavor in many different types of dishes. Like other commercially produced foods, ketchup fell under the regulations of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 that required labeling and monitored adulteration practices. In the ten years after that, manufacturers had to stop using the preservative sodium benzoate. Technological innovations made the manufacturing process more efficient, while print advertising and, starting in the 1920s, radio advertising kept the industry, and particularly Heinz, flourishing. Ketchup remained essentially the same from 1906 until the 1970s when manufacturers, in order to eliminate idle factory time, began to use tomato concentrate instead of fresh tomatoes in their product. To save money they used corn syrup instead of sugar, acetic acid instead of vinegar, and onion powder instead of fresh onions. These substitutions required longtime ketchup producers to reformulate their product. Despite the change, ketchup still sells widely and has been adopted in several other national cuisines, including those of Japan, India, Venezuela, and several European countries.

In this book, Smith has given us an overview of commercial ketchup production that assumes the popularity of the product from the very beginning and therefore leaves many more questions than it answers. Why was it that tomato ketchup became the most popular and, in fact, by the twentieth century the only ketchup commonly available on store shelves? Ketchup is not eaten alone so consumers had to be eating it along with something else. What was it? Did its use over time change? Did demand drive the market? If so, why? If the market encouraged demand, why was it that Americans so readily embraced ketchup when their other food habits, like the traditional meal of meat and starch, did not alter? Finally, could there have been something about bottled ketchup or the identifiable Heinz label that, like hundreds of other brand-name products starting to be available to consumers in the late-nineteenth century, gave millions of immigrants and non-immigrants a sense of being American without threatening their own ethnic identity?[3]

Or, could it have had less to do with ethnicity and more to do with social class, as was the case with the adoption of bananas by Americans? Virginia Scott Jenkins's ***Bananas: An American History*** tells a story of supply leading demand similar to that of ketchup and popcorn. In the case of bananas, shipping companies that moved people and goods between the United States and the Caribbean in the nineteenth century looked for ways to increase profits and cut expenses. They cultivated foreign banana production in the latter while at the same time tried to create a domestic market for the fruit. Bananas were first available to a sizeable population at the Philadelphia Exposition of 1876 where experimenters could buy one

for ten cents. After that, however, they did not become widely available for twenty more years and then were marketed as the "poor man's fruit." By the 1920s, importers found that this image actually impeded sales to middle- and upper-class consumers who did not want to eat the same foods as the lower classes. They remade the banana's image to one of health and status to appeal to the new generation of well-educated middle-class mothers and teachers who looked for vitamin content. Vitamins were not discovered until after the beginning of the twentieth century and before that time bananas, and fruit in general, were not valued as nutritionally important foods.

The big movers in the change were the United Fruit Company and Standard Fruit Company. By 1920, United Fruit had become a huge vertically integrated company that owned banana plantations, refrigerated transport ships, and railroad cars for its banana business, and also ran passenger, mail, and freight ships, offered cruises, and owned hotels. This was no small feat because at the turn of the century the banana business was burdened with production problems (how to keep a year-round flow of bananas to the market) and shipping problems (how to keep the bananas from ripening too quickly and getting bruised during transit and, in World War I, the requisitioning of its ships for the war effort). In addition, there were banana diseases that destroyed trees, Securities and Exchange Commission activities, corporate wars, hurricanes, and a proposed but defeated banana tax.

As in the case of popcorn, when the middle-class American lifestyle changed in the 1950s, the banana went along with it, this time as a nutritious low-calorie food. Jenkins concludes that within fifty years of their presence in the market, bananas lost their novelty status and became a staple item (p. 101). Consumers viewed bananas as a more variable food than popcorn. Fruit companies, home economists, ladies magazines, and cook book publishers presented Americans with numerous ways to use bananas from the once-novel slicing of bananas on top of cereal to more exotic uses such as drying them and grinding them into flour to be substituted in breads or fed to babies. Like ketchup and popcorn, by the 1950s, bananas held their own as an important part of our visual, oral, and even musical culture.

Ketchup, popcorn, and bananas go so well together because, according to these authors, they are all products that gained staple status in our society due to the efforts first of enterprising businessmen who wanted to make money and later because of industrious home economists, cookbook writers, and other marketers, like street and theater vendors. Technology assisted production, distribution, and marketing. Science evaluated and improved the productive capacities of tomatoes, bananas, and popcorn and their nutritional values. In each case, one or two companies became dominant in the industry and shaped the food's acceptance by Americans. Furthermore, those companies had some lucky breaks. With popcorn, it was the movies. With bananas it was the discovery of vitamins and germs (bananas were the only fruit to come in nature's "germ-free" packaging).

These studies also complement each other in the questions they do not answer, namely, why Americans embraced these foods at all. Were Americans so much at the hands of marketers that they purchased and consumed ketchup, popcorn, and bananas because someone told them to? Sociologists and anthropologists have concluded that eating and dietary changes are far more complex than that conclusion suggests. People will incorporate new foods in their diet for numerous reasons including to achieve a sense of refinement, to belong to a social or cultural group, or to absorb the cultural values that surround a particular food. Eaters have a strong sense of good and bad foods as well as those that are edible and inedible and will accept or reject foods accordingly.[4]

Looked at from this perspective, these three studies do give us hints that might answer the question of why Americans ultimately embraced ketchup, popcorn, and bananas or why it took so long for them to do so. Jenkins mentions social class as a major factor in middle-class consumers' refusal to incorporate bananas into their diets as a mainstay and nutritional content as a reason for their change of mind. They only did so when the image of the banana changed from being a cheap snack for the poor to one of offering health and refinement, a particular goal of middle-class America. Eating bananas not only gave Americans a sense of health and refinement, but a sense of belonging to a group as well.

Could that have been the case with ketchup and popcorn? Smith concludes that people ate ketchup because it lasted a long time. This myth about ketchup and preserved foods in general is one that he perpetuated rather than dispelled. In early Anglo-American culture, preserved foods had symbolic and nutritional significance.[5] In regards to popcorn, Smith states that until the 1950s most people ate popcorn on festive occasions or at sites of entertainment. What was the symbolic meaning of eating a frivolous food at a frivolous event? Did it give people a sense of belonging to a group that somehow was otherwise missing in a large anonymous crowd? Did ketchup do the same thing but at people's homes and in restaurants?

When read alone, ***Popped Culture***, ***Pure Ketchup***, and ***Bananas*** read more as business histories than food histories. When read together (and in conjunction with other food studies), however, these three studies play off each other and raise important analytical questions. Food historians have amassed an extensive collection of similar case studies. It is now time for them to use each other's work in the synthesis and analysis of larger questions.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Sidney Mintz, ***Sweetness and Power*** (New York: Penguin Books, 1985); Sophie D. Coe and Michael D. Coe, ***The True History of Chocolate*** (London: Thames & Hudson, 1996); Nelson Foster and Linda S. Cordell, eds., ***Chilies to Chocolates*** (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992); and Betty Fussell, ***The Story of Corn*** (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992).

[2]. Richard Bushman, ***The Refinement of America*** (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

[3]. Donna Gabaccia, in ***We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*** (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), discusses the complex process whereby Americans of all ethnic backgrounds with traditional food habits began to try "American" foods as well as foods of other more traditional ethnic groups.

[4]. For an excellent overview of the theoretical perspectives of food and food habits see Deborah Lupton, ***Food, the Body and the Self*** (London: Sage Publications, 1996), pp. 6-36.

[5]. Trudy Eden, "The Art of Preserving: How Cooks in Early Virginia Used Nature to Control Nature," ***Eighteenth Century Life*** 23 (1999): pp. 13-23.

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