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This book is an exploration of US American history, told through fifteen distinct foods. The study spans from the pre-Columbian era to the present day, though primarily focuses on the nineteenth century and beyond. Each chapter is structured around a specific food item, using it as an analytic tool to investigate a significant period in US history. Zeide introduces the reader to the ways in which the production and consumption of food has shaped and reflected the social, cultural, political, and economic history of the US. To cover these themes over such a substantial time period is a massive undertaking. The book is therefore best understood as a survey text for students and interested readers, aiming to offer an overview of US history and how insights can be gained by focusing on food. It is part of a new series from Bloomsbury in which regional and global histories are explored through fifteen themed case studies.

Chapter 1 focuses on pemmican, a type of preserved meat widely consumed by Native Americans, as well as the existential threat of colonization on Native American societies. Similarly, chapter 2 outlines how the production of corn was a point of collaboration and conflict between Native Americans and European colonizers in the early modern period. Chapter 3 draws out the interconnections between the uptake in domestic whiskey production and the formation of national identity in the years leading up to and following the American Revolution. Chapter 4 explores Graham bread, a type of whole-grain bread developed by dietary reformer Sylvester Graham to improve the physical and spiritual health of the nation. Graham bread was an early instance where dietary changes were recognized as key drivers of societal reform.

Chapter 5 highlights potlikker, a broth of boiled greens that was commonly prepared and eaten by enslaved Africans, to investigate the links between food, power, and agency in the transatlantic “trade” and trafficking of enslaved people. Chapter 6 uses the adoption and proliferation of peanuts to illuminate the role of food during the American Civil War, and the violent racism of the Reconstruction. Chapter 7 covers the emergence of
industrialized food in the Progressive Era, appropriately focusing on Jell-O, an American brand of gelatin-based dessert introduced in 1897. The mass production and consumption of Jell-O was only made possible through the centralization of the meatpacking industry and refinement of food advertising. Chapter 8 centers on spaghetti, emphasizing the vital role of immigrants and their foodways in the social and cultural history of the United States. Chapter 9 explores the exploitative labor practices of Californian orange production during the Great Depression and the Dustbowl.

In chapter 10 the narrative reaches the Second World War and its dramatic impact on conceptions of America at home and abroad. The focal point here is Spam, a brand of processed canned pork, which became a global cultural phenomenon during and after the war. Chapter 11 centers on green bean casserole, a dish created by food scientists at Campbell's Soup Company in the 1950s, to explore Cold War competition, evolving notions of domesticity, and the growing influence of processed food in the American diet. In contrast to the business-driven processed food of the preceding two chapters, chapter 12 highlights tofu to represent the counterculture and protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Carrying the chronology from the 1970s through to the 2000s, chapters 13 and 14 examine chicken nuggets and the Big Mac. Through these, the book investigates the interlinked themes of agricultural intensification, globalization, and American capitalist hegemony. The final chapter brings the book up to the present with the Korean taco, a fusion food that emerged in 2008 and exemplified the growing importance of social media to both food and society.

This structure is successful, and the choices of food are appropriate in driving the narrative and exploring the book’s key themes. Zeide brilliantly illustrates the interconnected threads of US history that coalesce around food, particularly racism, gender, nutritionism, technological development, exploitation, and class. In addition to this, the book is well written and enjoyable to read. The analysis in each chapter is enlivened with engaging examples. For instance, the interconnection between domesticity and developments in food processing is illustrated through Ernest Dichter’s “egg theory,” the idea that “housewives” would be more inclined to purchase prepackaged cake mixtures if they were required to add their own fresh eggs. Zeide recognizes that mundane culinary practices are revealing of much wider societal developments.

A frequent difficulty in writing the history of a nation through its food is that it can become an uncritical celebration of the dominant food culture. Zeide does not fall into this trap; the role of marginalized and exploited groups in US history and its food is covered extensively throughout. For example, it is explained how the emergence of peanuts as a mythologized food of the Old South is inextricable from the African American innovation and labor that led to its rise, and which was subsequently understated or disregarded. Similarly, Zeide illustrates the tension facing immigrants to the US at the turn of the twentieth century between pressure to “Americanize” their diets and the adaptation of their foods and cooking practices to the American cuisine. The attempted imposition of a normative American diet and normative American values speaks to wider questions regarding citizenship and what it means to be an American. The book emphasizes that the history of the US told through food necessarily illustrates the wider social and political struggles that have formed it.

The book also explores the environmental impact of the production and consumption of food in the US. In the opening chapters, Zeide vividly portrays the profound consequences of colonial exploitation on the land and environment. As the narrative progresses, the focus shifts toward contemporary factors like food capitalism, deregulation, and industrialization. Throughout the book, Zeide brings into sharp relief the intricate web of
social, cultural, political, and economic forces that have culminated in the current food system’s detrimental impact on the environment. Importantly, Zeide does not overlook the significance of nonhuman animals in US (food) history. She sheds light on critical issues like the near extinction of the American bison and the inhumane treatment of cows and chickens in the meatpacking and broiler chicken industries. Moreover, Zeide draws connections between the intensification of agriculture and the emergence of diseases like salmonella, \textit{e. coli} (\textit{Escherichia coli}), and BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy). By addressing these aspects, Zeide provides a compelling examination of the relationship between our food system, nonhuman animals, and public health.

The book's brief means it must cover US history as well as the foods that act as case studies for each chapter. While Zeide skillfully applies the food lens to US history, there are times where general US history takes precedence over the food. This is to its strength as an introductory text; however, it does mean that, at times, the chapters lose sight of the case study in question. For example, tofu is used to illustrate the counterculture and protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s yet seems mostly applicable to environmental and alternative food groups rather than the civil rights movements also covered. Nonetheless, it is to the book's credit that it does not exclude important narratives in the period for the sake of a narrow focus on the selected food item. Furthermore, while the section of chapter 15 that assesses the erosion of democracy during the Trump presidency is powerfully written, it does feel disjointed from the tone of the preceding chapters. This tonal shift is understandable when covering such a contemporary topic, and Zeide does conclude the chapter by bringing it back to food, noting how notions of identity and citizenship are inherent both in fusion food and the current political moment.

In this book, Zeide brings out the exploitative and destructive nature of the modern food system, shedding light on the negative impacts on people and the environment. She concludes more optimistically, highlighting the role of food as an act of care and its potential to foster hope and create meaningful connections within communities and with nature. This positivity aligns the work with writers such as Wendell Berry who have argued that food provides greater pleasure the more involved people and communities become in its production. Given its insightful exploration of the history and complexities of the US food system, I can recommend this book to anyone seeking to delve further into these issues. Its relevance extends beyond the US-centric approach, making it suitable for introductory courses in food history as well as broader historical studies. The book includes class discussion questions for each chapter, which will be helpful in this regard.