History Against the Grain

By CHRISTINE ROSSMANN-TUCHER

January 15, 2018

A new global story of food tracks the rise of "middling cuisine," but neglects to read for the hungry

IT'S a given by now that what we eat has far-reaching social and political consequences. "The Global Food War Is Escalating—Whose Side Are You On?" reads the headline of a recent article on Alternet. It's a good question. What we put in our mouths has far greater implications than many would care to admit: climate change, rising obesity and public healthcare costs, "Big Ag" factory farming, the patented-seed racket, the growing demand in developing nations for a Western diet rich in animal protein. It has become quite clear that, as pleasures go, dining is perhaps not as inconsequential as we'd like to think. But has this always been the case?

If Rachel Laudan is correct, it has indeed. Her well researched, consistently fascinating *Cuisine and Empire: Cooking in World History* (recently reviewed) sets out to chart, as she writes, "the dissemination of a sequence of cuisines across wide areas of the globe over the contribution of each to the global culinary heritage." And she accomplishes the task admirably. *Cuisine and Empire* serves up generous portions of information on everything from the rise of root and tuber cuisines in Africa and parts of Asia to the emergence of "beef and beer" diets among the British working classes and to the ubiquity of McDonald's in the world.

Amid Laudan's smorgasbord of fact and stories emerges one distinct takeaway: For most of history, most people spent a huge amount of time and effort cooking food that wasn't very tasty. This owed more to long-standing social and cultural practices than to any technological limitations. Laudan writes that "rank and cuisine were believed to be closely connected. Thus 'It followed that eating the cuisine of a person of lower rank or of animals would turn the diner into a lesser person, or even a beast."

An individual's meat must be meet and proper to her rank. For the poor this meant grain, grain, and more grain. Laudan explains in her book's opening pages how grains basically fueled the bulk of humanity, sustaining generations of slaves, peasants, and other of history's unfortunate, recounting how in the 19800 archaeologists uncovered a small village dating to 19,400 BCE. It sat close to Lake Kinneret—better known as the Sea of Galilee. Among its ruins were found some 19,000 samples of grains. In one of the huts unearthed was a grindstone. "Thus about ten thousand years before the development of farming," she writes, "cooks had mastered a wide array of culinary techniques, including those for dealing with the roots and grains that were the first plants to be domesticated." Soon thereafter, she continues, "grain cuisines began to support cities, states, and armies," where they "splintered into subcuisines for powerful and poor, town and country, settled populations and nomads."

Such splintering didn't much affect diets of the poor, who had little recourse to any other kind of food. In ancient Mesopotamia, for example, foot soldiers, prisoners, construction workers, servants, and others received only eight cups of barley grains, porridge, and bread daily. If one was lucky there might be some dried fish to go with the mush. But even this small boon was of little consolation. "When a poor man dies, do not try to revive him," went a popular saying of the time. "When he had bread, he had no salt; when he had salt, he had no bread."

Not only were grain-based diets bland, they were a lot of work to prepare. Archaeologist Gordon Hillman recorded the steps taken by peasants to prepare an ancient Turkish variety of wheat. They involved threshing, beating, trampling, sledging, raking, winnowing, sieving, separating, storing, parching, pounding, more winnowing, more sieving, even more sieving, wetting, and finally storing the wheat, which was only partially cleansed by the effort. Grains were so much work, in fact, that some anthropologists think the only reason we bothered with them in the first place is because some innovative soul discovered they could be transformed into beer.

Though the rich also ate grains, they supplemented them with the meat of seemingly every creature under the sky. Sacrifice was occasion to gorge on meat, a present from the gods. In 645 BCE, Ashurbanipal, the last king of the Assyrian Empire, gave a feast in his capital. An enormous number of animals were sacrificed: a thousand cattle, a thousand calves, ten thousand sheep, fifteen thousand lambs, five hundred each of stags, gazelles, ducks, geese, and doves, as well as thousands of smaller birds. Only once the elite found they could eat no more were the commoners given leftovers.

Circumstance sometimes forced the rich to deprive the poor of their humble foodstuffs. Peasants of China's Yellow River Valley subsisted on millet gruel. When the retainers of Emperor Tang seized this scant sustenance for his warriors, the peasants likened the king's men to vermin, and cried, "Large rats! Large rats! Don't eat our millet!"

Only in certain marginal figures within a culture were to be found departures from inequitable dietary arrangements. Greek philosophers, Taoists, Jews, and Christians rejected the leftovers of the ruling class, choosing instead the peasantry's humble foods, which they thought more virtuous. By rejecting meat offered in sacrifice they rejected the law that bound state, people, and the gods together.

The ancient Celts also marked a departure. In thanksgiving for success in battle they sacrificed horses, pigs, and cattle to their gods. But the meat of these animals didn't go to the monarch alone. Rather, the warriors sat together on the ground and ate, king and queen feasting on leg joints, the charioteer on a creature's head, and the rest on various cuts distributed according to rank. It wasn't fancy, but everyone got their share of savory bits of roast flesh, which was more than any peasant of the time could expect.

Nonetheless, most of the world's population subsisted on grain. And dining continued in this vein for centuries. Country peasants ate insipid gruels, reserving their finest produce for sale to ever increasing numbers of town and city dwellers, who to them represented simply "giant maws, gobbling up the food, only to excrete it into stinking sewers, clogged drains, and polluted rivers." This was, more or less, anywhere societies formed elaborate hierarchies, from the Kingdom of Aragon to the great empire of Kublai Khan. Occasionally, the peasants revolted against this arrangement, especially when their crops failed or some other calamity happened to make their lives more miserable than usual. But permanent change to this dreary state of affairs proved impossible, because it was evidently God's—and, by extension, the king's—will that it be arranged so, went the thinking of the time. And so it remained.

Change did come at last, though it was largely limited to Europe. The 16th century saw ideas about who feasted and who fasted become more enlightened, their evolution spurred by new insights into nutrition, theology, and politics. Natural philosophers advanced new theories of digestion. Protestants reevaluated the idea that ascetic cuisine was a means of spiritual growth. Political theorists challenged the regal right to fine dining. Coalescing from this new era of lofty thought was a notion of "middling cuisine," which, as Laudan writes, represents a "major innovation of the modern period."

Middling cuisine, as you may have guessed, bridged "high and low cuisine," as Laudan writes. "Rich in fats, sugar, and exotic foodstuffs," it depends heavily on sauces and sweets and must be served by and eaten with specialized utensils in dedicated dining areas. The growth of these cuisines marked a global "nutritional transition" from diets consisting mostly of grains to diets high in sugar, oils, and meat.

Though this diet is familiar to us today, at the time of its emergence it was quite revolutionary. Middling cuisine and its attendant ceremony—cozy, family dinners eaten with restrained pomp—became associated with republican ideals that exalted individualism and self-government. "In particular," notes Laudan, "republicans, like Protestants, believed the family meal, where children imbibed both physical and moral nourishment, not the aristocratic banquet, was the foundation of the state." This idea found special purchase in the Dutch republic and the young United States, where housewives were urged to uphold the values thereof through smart cookery and household management.

As these empires grew, more and more people in the colonizing countries were liberated from labor-intensive, nutrient-poor food. "The years between 1880 and 1914 marked the greatest turning point in culinary history since the mastery of grains and the divergence of high and humble cuisines millennia earlier," writes Laudan, "the culmination of changes that had begun in the mid-seventeenth century and haltingly accelerated from 1800."

The turn meant that a meaty, fatty diet spread beyond the bourgeoisie to the salaried middle classes and wage-earning working classes. Even the most down-at-the-heels clerk could enjoy his tea with plenty of white sugar and a slice of sponge cake. Consumption of carbohydrates, fats, sugar, and tea soared. Meat-eating in Britain increased by 20 percent between 1880 and 1900. Germans similarly enjoyed an abundance of animal protein, going from eating 59 pounds a year per person in 1873 to 103 in 1914. And the French slathered their baguettes with 50 percent more butter in 1884 than they had in 1870.

Interestingly, this new affluence tracked with changes in voting rights and other progressive developments. "Thus," writes Laudan, "changes that gave more women say in the political process in modern states were paralleled by the shifts in food and culinary preferences formerly reserved for a powerful minority." For the first time, she continues, the urban middle class "no longer had to suffer the indignity of watching the rich and powerful eat a fabulous cuisine they could only dream of.... Although to this day food continues to be used to reinforce minor differences in status, the hierarchical culinary philosophy of ancient and traditional cuisines was giving way to the more egalitarian culinary philosophy of modern cuisines."

The appearance of modern, egalitarian cuisine also coincided with immense growth in population and territory in the Anglosphere world. Beef and beer seemed the perfect fuel for growing robust cities. By the 1890s, both London and New York contained over a million people. In one generation, Laudan tells us, Chicago had grown from "almost nothing to nearly a million inhabitants ... while other American cities, such as Cincinnati, Saint Louis, Pittsburgh, and San Francisco, had populations of around half a million." In Britain and its colonies it was much the same. Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow in Britain, Toronto in Canada, Melbourne and Sydney in Australia, and Buenos Aires in British-influenced Argentina all boasted populations that were "huge by world-historical standards."

This cultural and culinary enlightenment throughout the West depended on the destruction of sustainable ways of life elsewhere. In his article "Famine and Social Change during the Transition to Colonial Rule in Northeastern Tanzania, 1880–1886," James Giblin details how between 1880 and 1940, Zigula-speaking cultivators of that region experienced an unprecedented ecological and subsistence crisis. Famine after famine stuck their communities. When they weren't suffering famine, there were suffering food shortages. Those who didn't die from starvation were killed more slowly by malnutrition and its accompanying illnesses. Increased competition for food turned neighbor against neighbor. In fewer than 60 years, the health and well-being of Zigula-speaking communities was devastated.

The cause of this destruction seemed a mystery. For centuries, the Zigula-speaking Tanzanians had carefully planned systems in place to forfend against the occasional famine. They practiced sound farming techniques, planting a variety of vegetables, grains, tubers, plantains, and legumes in well-watered fields. They were also incredibly community-minded. What crops they could not use or trade they added to common food stores. Such sensible farming and resource redistribution ensured that no one famine would devastate an entire community. The Zigula-speaking Tanzanians experienced hard times, certainly, but never any kind of prolonged suffering that caused absolute devastation.

Yet in 1880 they began to experience prolonged suffering. The cause was colonial expansion, which brought middling cuisine to their parts. While the working classes of the Western world were finally beginning to enjoy a more comfortable life, taking their tea and coffee with cream and sugar like their betters, the communities of northeastern Tanzania had come under the Germans, who had expanded into Africa under the pretense of fighting the slave trade. Seeing the opportunity for commercial enterprise (especially in the aforementioned coffee), they established their own colony. No longer their own masters, exploited, their lives made precarious, Zigula-speaking Tanzanians raided communal food stores to sell on the open market. What food farmers grew, they hoarded for themselves, and they abandoned their ecologically sensitive farming practices for those that produced large crops but depleted the soil. And so when famine struck, only the richest among them survived.

What happened in Tanzania was repeated the world over during this period. As middling cuisine spread, so did the resource strains attending it. Laudan pays only passing attention to this fact, but it is important that all those more in the West to enjoy a middling diet, sanitized by beef, for example, on the forced migration of Africans to the sugar plantations of the Caribbean, and the exploitative practices of the British East India Company that allowed so many to enjoy their daily cuppa. She considers not at all the ecological devastation wrought by changes in farming practices, and she discusses only in passing the ill-health brought on by the supplanting of native diets by processed food.

Indeed, *Cuisine and Empire* would have benefitted from a closer examination of the exploitative economic, social, and ecological practices that made middling cuisine possible. For nothing is gotten for free—and this is just as true today as it was in the 19th century. The final portion of Laudan's book is dedicated to tracing the spread of middling cuisine to a greater portion of the world's population. From the popularity of McDonald's hamburgers, to the increasing global demand for dairy and other high-fat animal products, more people than ever are enjoying a Western diet. "Those lucky enough to eat middling cuisine, with plentiful meat, fat, and sugar," writes Laudan, "are probably about one in three of the world's population, a higher proportion than ever before."

Laudan sees this is a positive development. "Children in countries with middling cuisines grow up taller and heavier than their parents who ate humble cuisines," she writes. "It is unusual to see people with legs bowed with rickets, throats bulging with goiter, and skin blotched and stained with scurvy and pellagra." She goes on to point out that not only are people becoming healthier, but that they are also reclaiming their lives. "Many of the mothers and a high proportion of the grandmothers of the shoppers [in a] Mexico City supermarket once spent hours grinding every day ... Now they could pick from [a] cornucopia with foods of all price ranges and from many parts of the world, middling cuisine has more variety than the traditional ones." This too is part of the blessing of middling cuisine. "Good food, and freely chosen, is part of living your own life," she continues. "Although this choice may be limited by economic necessity of choosing your food safely, the alternative is a world where the powerful constrain what you can eat, in the name of health, religion, or political and economic expediency."

This January issue is out now!
Click here to subscribe and get it today!

This is certainly a worthy goal. Yet you can't help but wonder whether, given current economic and agricultural practices, 7.5 billion people's eating middling cuisine would spell ecological disaster. *Cuisine and Empire* ends on a note that may strike some readers as so much wishful thinking. But it also presents us with enough of a history of our food choices and habits that we can begin to confront the challenge of feeding the world well while averting that disaster.

This January issue is out now!
Click here to subscribe and get it today!

Previously by
CHRISTINE ROSSMANN-TUCHER

Cooking Class

History Against the Grain

The Art of Antarctic Cooking