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Books in Review: Eating Right in America: The Cultural Politics of Food and Health

Eating Right in America: The Cultural Politics of Food and Health by Charlotte Biltekoff

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Despite this finitude, the book does more than inaugurate new silos for research. Although presented in the disciplined prose of sociology, it invites plenty of academic, activist, and everyday engagements—from critiques of market-centric regulation, to concrete recommendations for increasing recycling participation, to making the familiar strange in domestic food preparation. The editors may be congratulated for having begun an important conversation that can only grow.

David Boarder Giles, *University of Canterbury*

Eating Right in America: The Cultural Politics of Food and Health

Charlotte Biltekoff

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013

208 pp. Illustrations. \$22.95 (paper)

Well-written, thoughtful, and provocative, Charlotte Biltekoff's *Eating Right in America* explores four dietary reform movements in four eras of US history: the domestic science movement around the turn of the twentieth century, nutrition reform on the World War II home front, the alternative food movement of the late twentieth century, and the modern anti-obesity campaign. In all cases, Biltekoff argues, "lessons in eating right [have] doubled as lessons in good citizenship," and even seemingly bland dietary advice has communicated powerful subtexts about character and class (p. 125).

The book starts with the early domestic science movement, which worked in tandem with emerging nutrition science. In an era suspicious of dietary pleasure in general, reformers worked to convince poor people to spend less on food and described certain kinds of pleasure—costly meat, for example—as especially immoral for the poor. Nutrition science helped middle-class reformers shore up their own identities, Biltekoff says, as they described the poor as irresponsible eaters and unhealthy citizens. The book turns next to home-front nutrition reform during World War II, which also targeted working-class eating habits. New Recommended Dietary Allowances were intended to steer Americans toward optimal health and productive citizenship, but because RDAs were set unrealistically high, poorer Americans had an especially hard time conforming to them. Failure to follow dietary advice—and corresponding fears of widespread malnutrition, or "hidden hunger"—came to seem like an indictment of working-class willpower, Biltekoff argues, which further reinforced class distinctions.

Biltekoff turns next to the modern alternative food movement, where she sees more middle-class meddling. She is especially critical of Alice Waters and rightly denounces some of the outrageous comments Waters has made over the years about poverty and food choices. When it comes to specifics on Waters' Edible Schoolyard program, however, the critiques are not always as persuasive, such as the argument that in helping the poor Waters is aiding neoliberalism by softening its blow. Biltekoff also charges that the program's agenda is ultimately consumerist, a critique that feels a bit forced for a program that emphasizes production so heavily. In general, Biltekoff questions the alternative food movement's emphasis on pleasure; defining ethically righteous food as the most delicious created a mandate to change people's tastes as well as their behaviors, a project she sees as condescending and intrusive. How offensive you find it might depend on your view of the forces that shape our tastes in the first place. Biltekoff reproaches alternative food reformers for not taking the pleasures of fast, processed food seriously enough, but I found myself wondering, in turn, if she sometimes takes those pleasures *too* seriously. The book spends very little time discussing the profound changes that occurred in American diets during the last century as a result of industrial food, and a casual reader might be left with the impression that dietary reform by middle-class do-gooders is always patronizing and self-centered, while changes shaped by the food industry—arguably the biggest and most successful arena of dietary reform in the twentieth century—are neutral or even natural.

Finally, the book turns to the modern anti-obesity campaign, which intensified after 9/11 as it became easier to imagine fat as a threat to national security and identity. Biltekoff argues that the anti-obesity campaign transformed a description of elite habits, preferences, and body sizes into signs of virtue and prescriptions for universal health. In reality, she says, the idealization of thinness has less to do with health than with social status, and she points to a survey showing that some people say they would gladly give up years of life expectancy or have a limb amputated if it meant they could be thin. Ultimately, she writes, the emphasis on dietary self-control not only "reflected the values of neoliberalization but also played a role in advancing and normalizing them" (p. 126).

The book argues compellingly that a "moral hierarchy of good and bad eaters" has energized dietary reformers and influenced power and social class in the United States for more than a century (p. 103). It made me eager to know more, especially about what the people involved in all aspects of dietary reform thought about it. While some reformers certainly sought to erect class boundaries, as the book argues,

what about the many others who believed themselves to be motivated by precisely the opposite desire—to make access to safe, healthy food a tool of democratization? And what about ordinary eaters themselves? Biltekoff makes clear she never aimed to reveal what people have thought about the dietary advice directed at them, but I sometimes found it hard to join in the condemnation of dietary reform without knowing more about its reception. At times Biltekoff implies that people who listened to dietary reformers are dupes; for example, she suggests that a Hispanic man who said at the turn of the twenty-first century that he had control over his own weight had internalized a “pervasive, moralizing” discourse of personal responsibility (p. 129). Biltekoff believes that all “forms of dietary discourse [are] social constructions that have the potential to do violence to “bad eaters”” (p. 112). I would love to hear more about what ordinary people have believed, too.

With impressive brevity, Charlotte Biltekoff has provided a fascinating portrait of dietary reform over the long twentieth century. Her work will serve as a jumping-off point for more exploration of what the millions of people affected by dietary reform thought about it and, perhaps even more fundamentally, how they ate differently, or did not, as a result. *Eating Right in America* should get food scholars, and everyone else, thinking and talking.

Helen Zoe Veit, Michigan State University

The Kitchen as Laboratory: Reflections on the Science of Food and Cooking

Edited by César Vega, Job Ubbink, and Erik van der Linden
New York: Columbia University Press, 2013
xx + 312 pp. Illustrations. \$29.95 (cloth); \$19.95 (paper)

The culinary revolutions in *The Kitchen as Laboratory: Reflections on the Science of Food and Cooking* revive an early twentieth-century modernist and futurist rhetoric. It revolves around novelty and ignores and even avoids any “constructivist” notion of social justice or contemporary discussions of food sustainability, security, or safety. The unrestrained, hedonistic search for new experiences and utopian tastes is paradoxically based on appropriating technocratic approaches to food and cooking, which originated in the food industry. This ironic aspect—the food industry becoming an inspiration for food avant-garde movements and transformed into creative and even artistic cooking practices—is elaborated in twenty-two recipes, or rather science protocols and chapters. What distinguishes this book on “science-based cooking” from previous attempts involving molecular gastronomy (Nicholas Kurti,

Hervé This), experimental cuisine (Harold McGee), nouvelle cuisine (Henri Gault), modernist cuisine (Nathan Myhrvold and Maxime Bilet), techno-emotional (Alain Devahive), and even avant-garde cuisine (*cocina de vanguardia* by Ferran Adrià) is its convincing ability to demystify both contemporary science and cooking while preserving the values of scientific curiosity and hedonistic indulgence.

Rather than explaining the state of the art in molecular gastronomy or staging its next level with more sophisticated tools and tastes, this book liberates us from exaggerated expectations based on PR branding in science and food. It democratizes molecular cuisine practices while providing readers with rich references to cultural and historical aspects of both cooking and science. In every recipe we can witness the complex trajectory of molecular gastronomy from the scientific lab to the professional kitchen and then back to the private kitchens of amateur cooks, which actually returns science to its roots in the alchemist kitchens used for early experimentation. The molecular cuisine is as much about food as it is about democratizing science and transforming the laboratory into a public space, where we can understand and taste (food) science.

In the twenty-two chapters we can witness various attempts to make palatable the industrial production techniques that have become symbols of our loss of control over food production in recent decades. The basic techniques of this novel “science-based cooking,” such as spherification, foams, reductions, and gases, are just daring appropriations of large-scale industrial technology to “small-scale gastronomic goals” (p. xiii). Molecular gastronomy in this edited volume becomes something of a redemption of the “faux-food industry” into individual, anarchistic, and futuristic food experiments. The industrial methods of *sous vide* cooking, centrifuges and rotary distillers, freeze drying, and so on, which are supposed to maximize profits and ensure better control and standardization, are suddenly used to create unexpected textures, tastes, and experiences. They become utopian explorations of the limits of our taste buds and food imagination. The “irony of importing the instruments and tools of processed-food industry . . . into the artisan’s kitchen” (p. xiv) is in this sense closer to various hackers, makers, and DIYbio approaches that we see in other fields, such as electronics or biotech, which support consumer-driven innovation, appropriation, and customization. In this genealogy of the laboratory back to the kitchen we are witnessing the rise of food hackers against food technocrats, the former daring to create interesting paradoxes between old and new techniques of cooking, scientific protocols, and cooking recipes, but also (and this may be the most interesting part of the book)