



Introduction

EATING COMES BEFORE WORDS. A baby takes nourishment before it can speak. Eating and drinking establish our relationship with the surrounding world. We explain that world with words, but we remain dependent upon, and vulnerable to, the world that feeds us. When conditions are good, we have enough. We become accustomed to finishing a bottle of milk, a cup of coffee, a bowl of rice, and feeling satisfied. But we are never done learning about food. Learning lacks the quality of finality. There is always more to know. Our curiosity reappears like hunger returning. Why does an egg scramble as it does; how does grain ferment into beer; what makes a cookie crumble?

The first-ness of food in our lives is an understandably old story. “First we eat, and then we do everything else,” runs a widely quoted remark made by the food writer Mary Francis Kennedy Fisher. This is true enough. Eating doesn’t just come before words; it comes before all other human activities, within the narrow frame of an individual’s life. But beneath this simple statement lies an intricate relationship between sustenance and “everything else.” “Everything else” means everything from grinding corn into masa to breeding pigs, from creating agricultural subsidies for Japanese rice farmers to defending Ethiopian cattle-grazing land. In other words, there is a

great deal of agricultural and food work that prepares the way for eating. And some of this work is not toil in the fields, or in kitchens. The “everything else” in Fisher’s line includes the operations of culture, from Greek myths about the origin of the world out of an egg, to Dutch still-life paintings depicting opulent oysters and decaying fruit. Many kinds of human activity set the table (as it were) for eating, including creating images and descriptions of what we eat.

Representations of food aren’t just stories and images. They touch what they represent. Consider a burning fire on a beach in ancient Greece, upon which the hero Odysseus and his men have arranged pieces of sacrificial beef. The heroes of Homer’s epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, sacrifice, roast, and eat a great many animals, but all this carnivorousness was not the reality for ancient Greeks. It was hard to raise so many animals on rocky terrain. Rather, Odysseus’s larger-than-life diet reflects aspiration and the prestige ancient Greeks associated with meat.¹ To talk about meat was to describe luxury and high social status, or to connect great deeds with prestigious roasts. In the *Odyssey*, a number of servants and slaves serve Odysseus’s family, raising pigs and goats and cows for the nobles to eat, and a complex social hierarchy determines who enjoys what. But stories about meat helped to maintain meat’s prestige, not just in stories told by poets but also in the daily lives of the gathered audience members. We must reverse M. F. K. Fisher: first we do everything else, from planting crops to telling stories, and then we can eat.

This book is an invitation to be curious about food, and especially to think about food in new ways. The history and anthropology of food show us the strange tales of origin behind familiar tastes and illuminate mysteries within commonplace rituals. But we have to be willing to dig. A ripe strawberry, bursting in your mouth, tells you nothing about the experience of bending down to pick that strawberry in a sun-baked field. It says little about the history of the strawberry’s breeding, the emergence of the modern plant from a now-

forgotten ancestor through generations of domestication. In a certain sense, a plate of food is the coming-together of natural history (the evolutionary stories of the plants and animals we cook) and human history (the ways in which we “guide evolution,” raise and cook them). But what hungry eater pauses to inquire into this?

Nevertheless, a taste or a smell gives us a place to begin. Tastes and smells are a kind of information, telling the body about the food we put in our mouths. Is this safe? Is it nourishing? Will this be good? Our body’s needs are simple enough, and easily satisfied, but food and drink can also pique our curiosity. We may pause in the supermarket to look at a fruit we’ve never seen before (perhaps a dragonfruit); we ask about a surprising shape at the fish counter (maybe it’s a monkfish). We wonder who eats it, and how (or if) they cook it. Or we look at something familiar (a bag of granola, say) and realize we know nothing about how it is made. This book is about the questions that food and drink can compel us to ask. It is about the history of food as a presence in the tastes of the present day. It is also about the way culture guides our hands as we take the next strawberry and cut it with a knife, thinking of a pie. This domesticated strawberry is not natural, wild, but already part of the field of practices and beliefs we call culture. Without human intervention, corn on the cob would just be another kind of grass.

This book’s title and the opening lines above pay homage to John Berger’s 1972 book on art history, *Ways of Seeing*, an adaptation of a television series that introduced many viewers to a new way of thinking about art.² Influenced by Marxist cultural criticism, Berger reminded readers that fine art is not simply a heritage of beauty. Everything from the act of painting to hanging paintings in museums tells stories about class, power, and social conflict. Art is a formal exercise in representing and conjuring human experience, but it does not float free of context. Berger sought to unpack the social relations bundled within painting, especially prestigious forms of painting such as

modern European portraiture. In a similar way, foods express the ways desire and appetite shape our lives: sometimes dramatically, like gold foil draped over a dish of chicken biryani, or less visibly, as with birds bred over generations to produce more meat faster. The social conflicts and oppressions of the past survive in the cuisine of the present, albeit in greatly transformed ways. So do past patterns of human migration, settlement, trade, war, and travel.

We desire food and drink. It is good to acknowledge this, and to remember that the body's appetites are not to be degraded as somehow "below the neck," an animalistic shame. Our appetites are the heart of our relationship with food, and we can learn much by thinking about them, and even by indulging them. Personal experience is a crucial tool for studying food. But like other human desires, our hunger and thirst can mystify. There are stories in our foods that flavor alone does not tell. Sugar pleases us, but that pleasure says nothing about the history of the colonial plantations where enslaved people once planted and harvested sugar cane. Desire is one of this book's themes—the desire for survival (gruel when the larder is bare), for beloved food (grandmother's noodle soup), for novelties (spices obtained at great risk on the high seas)—but power is another (the power Europeans exerted over colonized natives, for example). So is identity, in the sense that our foods and ways of cooking express our cultural and social roots.

But identities change over time. This pie recipe may have been in our family for generations, but it hasn't been with us forever, and each baker has added or subtracted something. We eat across cultural boundaries, flipping between "family food" and that of others. And no cuisine is permanent or stable. Change has always characterized who we are and what we eat, even if we feel culinary anxiety and cling to dishes we call "traditional" or "authentic." Human communities migrate, or invade each other's lands; new ingredients travel along trade routes. Thus movement is another one of this book's

themes. We also attend to the differences between the clean and the dirty, the edible and the inedible, which shape so many of our food practices, from the question of which plants and animals we call food to how we wash our dishes. Tools and techniques are part of culture too, and so are the bodies of food workers. For generations, women ground maize into corn flour to make tortillas on a flat stone mortar called a *metate*; their daily motion, the effects on their knees and shoulders, became part of a way of eating.

This book consists of a series of historical chapters, leading chronologically from the origins of agriculture to the early twenty-first century, interleaved with vignettes drawn from our observations and ethnographic work in different food worlds. In these chapters and vignettes we offer specific cases that raise important questions about food and drink. We survey key ideas from cultural anthropology and history that help to explain human food practices and beliefs, but we do not address ourselves solely or primarily to scholars. Our goal is not to encompass the whole history of human foodways, which a short book (or even a very long one) never could. This book reflects our own past research interests and specialties—even our tastes.

A note of personal introduction, then. We are your authors: Merry (“Corky”) I. White is a cultural anthropologist of Japan, and of food and drink in Japan and beyond, who has also worked as a caterer, food journalist, and cookbook writer. Benjamin (“Ben”) A. Wurgaft is her son, a writer and historian, who earned a doctorate in European intellectual history while working as a food journalist. Ben has also trained and practiced in the cultural anthropology of science and technology. We both believe that the pleasures of food and drink, and the dynamic challenge of food work itself, add to and don’t distract from the intellectual rewards of studying food. These things are all bound up with each other. The chapters and vignettes in this book reflect our diverse interests, but also the decades of good luck that have allowed us to travel, taste, and benefit from hospitality around the

world, from growing up eating kosher dills in Minnesota, to cooking with local herbal blends in Tuscany, to sampling croissants in Tokyo. Some of these vignettes reflect shared experiences; others are singly authored.

While the chapters offer a chronological food history that takes us from the origins of agriculture to the present, the vignettes introduce the cultural anthropology of food, which seeks the expressions of meaning in food practice. At the heart of cultural anthropology is observation. The anthropologist brings a trained and purposeful naïveté to fieldwork, open to everything, and to all possible significance. We all bring filters and preconceptions to every observation, but the best way to work with that bias is first to acknowledge it, and then to cast our awareness wide and deep. You never know which details, or senses, are significant: a man carries a grocery bag on the subway, and it threatens to split, carrots sticking out of holes in its side; the sound of church bells draws black-garmented women in for services, while their men sit at an outdoor café, drinking coffee; a bin smells like mellow fermentation or exudes the stench of rotting garbage. Historical research often begins in an archive, and rarely involves fieldwork, but it shares an important feature with cultural anthropology. While historians all have their ideological and methodological biases, we work with evidence, just as anthropologists do, and we have to be open to the possibility that evidence will make us reformulate our views.

In the history and anthropology of food there are different kinds of questions, each answered with their appropriate kinds of methods and evidence. There are empirical questions we hope to answer, and there are theoretical explanations we hope to offer, and part of the art of the practice is becoming clear about which is which. We refine our questions and learn what methods and evidence will help us to answer them.

Anthropology almost always starts with research conducted in the contemporary world, but it often plunges us into the past of a

community. Thus a food anthropologist might start by sitting on a stool at a ramen stall in Tokyo, then move on to the origins of the *dashi* that infuses ramen broth, and to Japanese concerns about the future of the waters, the migrations of fish, and the farming of seaweed. History, by contrast, is the study of change over time, and food history often starts with research into the letters, diaries, or physical evidence of past generations of cooks and eaters. Cookbooks and menus are material for the cultural historian of food; shards of pottery serve archaeologists who look at cooking practices. But when we ask how past actors cooked and ate, and made meaning of these acts, we often reach for the tools of cultural anthropologists, for we know that cultural practices infuse and shape everything from tilling a field to setting a table. As we begin, keep these questions in mind: what can we aspire to know about food? What steps should we take to learn it? What can our meals tell us about the structure of our communities? Who are the farmers, who are the cooks, who makes the pots that dinner cooks in? Who makes the wine and who does the dishes?³