

Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration. *By Hasia R. Diner*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001. xvii + 292 pp. Index, notes, illustrations. Cloth, \$39.95. ISBN 0-674-00605-4.

Reviewed by Tyler Anbinder

As cultural history becomes increasingly popular, scholars are paying more and more attention to Americans' eating habits. This is especially true among historians of immigration. Through a variety of works published over the last decade, we have learned that "foodways" (culinary habits and the cultural patterns those practices reflect) played a significant role in both the assimilation of immigrants and their eventual acceptance by native-born Americans. Hasia Diner considers these issues in *Hungering for America*, but the focus of her study, and what makes it both important and original, is her argument that food played a vital role in motivating immigrants to come to the United States in the first place. "The men and women who came to America came hungry and in part because of hunger," she writes. "Immigrants never believed that the streets of America were paved with gold," but "they expected that its tables were covered with food" (p. xvii).

Diner first considers Italian immigrants, devoting a chapter to their European eating experience and then another to their culinary response to American life. We discover that southern Italian peasants faced "the ever present danger of hunger" in their homelands, but that in America "they ate better, not just than they had, but [even better] than their social superiors had" (p. 83). The book's next two chapters treat the Irish story, again first in Europe and then in America. This method of organization represents one of the book's few disappointments, for while many of the details differ, the overall thrust of each pair of chapters is the same—hunger in Europe, a desire for more and better food, and a fulfillment of that desire in the United States. By the time we get to the two Jewish chapters, consequently, we can pretty much predict what is coming, albeit with *gefilte* fish replacing *polenta*, Jewish delis substituting for spaghetti joints, and Passover banquets standing in for Easter feasts.

Yet there is more to Diner's book than her thesis that food drew immigrants to America. She devotes so much attention to the immigrants' lives in the United States in part to substantiate her secondary thesis—that the abundance of food in America reshaped the lives of the immigrants and their native foodways. "The basic nature of American plenty left a deep imprint on the various ethnic food cultures which developed among the immigrants," writes Diner (p. 229). Diner's most interesting observation in this regard concerns the origin of "spaghetti with

meatballs.” Such a dish is unheard of in Italy, but Italian immigrants so associated America with meat eating that they could not bear to give beef anything less than a featured role, even in their staple first course, which at home even the wealthy had served with little if any meat. Italian-Americans soon made spaghetti with meatballs a fixture in their homes.

Such stories might seem trivial, but Diner sometimes employs them to make important points. For example, she employs short digressions into the dependence of the Ojibway Indians on rice and the starvation forced upon Mexicans by Spanish colonizers to substantiate her argument that neither the Irish reliance on potatoes nor the famine that resulted from British indifference to the potato blight can account for the Irish disinterest in food. Diner has more trouble, however, coming up with an alternative explanation. In the end, she suggests that the potato diet and the famine “combined powerfully to repress an expressive culture based on food,” though given her preceding statements to the contrary this explanation ultimately leaves the reader unsatisfied (p. 105).

Diner makes a more convincing case for the proposition that the abundance of food in America may have killed European immigrants’ appetite for socialism. She approvingly quotes the German sociologist Werner Sombart, who once observed that “all socialist utopias come to nothing on roast beef and apple pie” (p. 11). In this, as in so many other passages in Diner’s work, one is reminded of David M. Potter’s *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (1954). Potter discusses immigrants only briefly, and food hardly at all, but much of Diner’s work advances Potter’s thesis that abundance shaped the American character.

If there are substantive weaknesses in Diner’s work, they primarily concern the lack of answers to the many questions raised by her work. One wonders, for example, whether the many Irish immigrants who settled in Canada or the Jews and Italians who immigrated to Argentina were equally impressed with the foods in those places. After all, food was equally abundant in those countries, though economic opportunity was perhaps a bit more circumscribed.

Another unanswered question involves return migration. The Irish and the Jews were two of the American immigrant groups least likely to return to their homelands to live, while Italians were among the most likely to make their stay in the United States temporary. Why would as many as one-third of all Italian immigrants have moved back to Italy if that meant returning to a land where food was so scarce? That so many Italians did decide to forsake the United States suggests that perhaps food did not have the magnetic effect on immigrants that Diner suggests. Having previously published important books on both Irish and Jewish immigrants, Diner does seem a bit less authoritative in her Italian chapters. Perhaps as a result, factual errors are more numerous in that section of the book. “Lucania,” for example, was not the

name of the southern Italian village to which Carlo Levi was banished (it was Aliano; Lucania was a region of Italy before it was rechristened “Basilicata”) (p. 29). Diner also errs in referring to a “Florentine dialect” (p. 65). Florentines have an accent, but not a dialect.

But these are minor flaws in what is certainly a significant and thought-provoking book, one that is just as rewarding to academics as it will be to the lay person who merely wonders why Americans eat the way they do.

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