

Peanuts: The Illustrious History of the Goober Pea. By Andrew F. Smith. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002. xx + 234 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN 0-252-02553-9.

Reviewed by David Gerard Hogan

Food historians seem to have greater latitude for fun than most scholars writing in other areas. While Andrew F. Smith's *Peanuts: The Illustrious History of the Goober Pea* is certainly serious scholarly work, examining an important commodity in the American economy and diet, it also doubles as a wonderful source for dozens of peanut-related recipes. Smith seems almost purposely to flaunt academic rigidity by incorporating these recipes into his volume; at the same time, he presents a sophisticated analysis of the peanut's role in history, the food industry, and popular culture. Rarely does a book cover a topic so comprehensively, leaving the reader both versed in the peanut's social and cultural significance and eager to experiment with the recipes.

Smith opens his volume with a thorough early history of the peanut, beginning with its pre-Columbian spread throughout South America and the Caribbean. Using translated narratives from Spanish and Portuguese explorers, he explains how and why different indigenous peoples cultivated and used the peanut, tracing its migration throughout the hemisphere. Here Smith also clarifies the origins of the peanut, showing how Europeans carried it from the New World to Europe and Africa. His explanation of its beginnings and migration also considers the role of other plants, notably a variety of "ground nuts" that historians from the time of early colonial writings have confused with the peanut.

After his clear explanation of the peanut's global spread, Smith redirects his narrative to consumption patterns of the peanut in North America. An inexpensive and easily cultivated crop, the peanut soon became the mainstay of the African slaves, who ate them raw, roasted, and boiled. For that reason, the legume long bore a stigma in the South as a lower-caste food and was strictly avoided by more affluent whites. In addition to being a slave food, peanuts were used by southern farmers to feed their livestock. By the early nineteenth century, however, lower-class whites, theater patrons, and college

students embraced peanuts as a snack food, extending their consumption to the urban North. This greater demand brought increased crop production, making peanuts more important to the southern agricultural economy. Smith contends that the peanut's enduring popularity arose from the conditions of deprivation that prevailed during the Civil War and Reconstruction. An abundant crop, it was adapted by southern soldiers and civilians to a variety of purposes, ranging from food to oil burned in lamps. Following the war, increasing popular demand brought much larger-scale commercial cultivation. Though still relegated primarily to the lower classes, the peanut became a leading American snack food in the late nineteenth century.

Perhaps the most valuable part of this book is Smith's analysis of the peanut's leap from snack food to mainstream component of the American diet. As with many foods, conflicting legends exist about who first created peanut butter. Earlier cultures almost certainly ground peanuts into a paste, he points out, as probably did many unnamed, forgotten slaves. Though Smith hesitates to credit any individual with being the American "first," he acknowledges that Seventh-Day Adventist physician and cereal entrepreneur Dr. John Harvey Kellogg experimented with, and popularized, an early version of peanut butter as a potential health food. With his brother Will, Kellogg formed the Sanitas Nut Food Company, marketing peanut butter as "Nut Butters." Nut Butters was an instant success, becoming the leading fad food of the early twentieth century and viewed as the ideal substitute for meats and other oils. Since John Harvey Kellogg was more concerned with spreading the secrets to healthy vegetarian living than with profits, he purposely did not patent his process for making peanut butter, opening the door for countless competitors. Other producers soon outpaced Kellogg's Sanitas, with Beechnut and H. J. Heinz becoming the two industry leaders. As peanut-butter production accelerated, other companies manufactured machinery to process the peanuts, thereby expanding their economic importance.

Smith's story of the peanut does not stop with the proliferation of peanut butter. Rather than focusing on the many inventors and scientists who contributed to the peanut's continued growth throughout the twentieth century, he turns his attention to the role of World War I in spurring its production, and he describes in detail how George Washington Carver continued Kellogg's work of developing and popularizing peanut-

related products while conducting research at Tuskegee Institute. Wartime food shortages brought peanuts even more into the mainstream diet as a major source of protein. While Smith credits Carver with the successful promotion of peanuts, he provides a balanced view of Carver's career. Carver spent decades devising a seemingly infinite number of peanut-derived foods and other products, yet his efforts were largely commercial failures, and he proclaimed spurious peanut cures for polio and other major diseases. While tempering his praise for Carver, Smith demonstrates his respect by devoting an entire chapter to Carver's life and achievements.

Beyond the overview of early product development and crop growth, Smith also discusses how the peanut became an important part of our diet and culture during the twentieth century, both as an ingredient of many foods and as baseball-stadium fare, a component of Cracker Jacks, and an advertising icon. For students of business history, Smith outlines the growth of a major American industry, detailing improvements in agricultural techniques, describing the role of technology in peanut processing, and itemizing the many foods that contain some part of the peanut. He leaves the reader with little doubt that the peanut is central to the American diet and economy. For students of American culture, Smith paints a more sweeping overview, offering the reader a sampling of the peanut's significance in music, advertising, and even as a national symbol. Though some of these areas would have benefited from more coverage, Smith nevertheless convincingly makes his point that Americans have adopted the peanut as their own. For peanut lovers, Smith offers more than forty pages of varied and wonderful recipes from vintage cookbooks. This is certainly a book for everyone. Smith's *Peanuts: The Illustrious History of the Goober Pea* will please food and business scholars with its marvelous historical narrative and analysis, will thrill peanut aficionados with a host of quirky facts, and will satisfy the tastes of everyone who enjoys good food.

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