

Food Nations: Selling Taste in Consumer Societies. *Edited by Warren Belasco and Philip Scranton*. New York: Routledge, 2002. viii + 288 pp. Index, notes, figures, illustrations, tables. Paper, \$24.95. ISBN 0-415-93077-4.

Reviewed by David G. Hogan

New directions in historical research and writing should be applauded. Going against the scholarly grain in deciding what topics are significant is professionally risky, which is why most novice historians tend to confine their research to areas whose boundaries have been established. For a long while, food history remained outside the perimeter of approved subjects, which meant it was advanced incrementally by limited and marginalized research. Even the seemingly inclusive social history movement largely overlooked food as a serious research pursuit. Few forums existed to publish food history, further deterring scholarly activity. Some scholarship has appeared in the last decade, but it has been sporadic, often targeting a popular readership. This longtime dearth of research makes the publication of Warren Belasco and Philip Scranton's new edited volume, *Food Nations*, especially welcome. In assembling their book, Belasco and Scranton collected over a dozen essays, covering a wide spectrum of food-related topics. Though these topics are quite varied, their unique common denominator is the serious study of the role of food in society.

To underline the significance of their barrier-breaking work, Warren Belasco titles his opening essay "Food Matters: Perspectives on an Emerging Field." He outlines the scant historiography of the field, writing how food history has been confined to the subdisciplines of folklore and ethnography. Belasco offers a frank and accurate assessment of why and how the study of food has been ignored, citing both elitism in the discipline and gender sensitivity, which links the topic of food preparation to a tradition of female subservience. Despite his lengthy discussion of this past neglect, Belasco strikes a distinctly celebratory tone, enthusiastically lauding recent work in the field. He cautiously declares the emergence and budding legitimacy of food history as a "serious" study, listing recent publications, academic panels, and even entire conferences. The academic community is finally awakening to the central role and importance of food in every culture. Belasco does concede, however, that the most successful recent writing about food has been not in scholarly work but rather in the more popular books that are concerned with epicurean or controversial topics. Essentially his opening article doubles as both an introductory overview of *Food Nations* and as a birth announcement for an entirely new field of history. Considering his central role in its inception, he should rightfully be very proud.

Belasco's analysis of the field and his advocacy for food study is echoed by Sidney Mintz, whose short essay following Belasco's powerfully reinforces the centrality of food in every culture. Mintz argues that food is the essential foundation of humanity, with hunger for food being the most basic instinctive drive. Adding to that obvious argument, he compiles explanations for food's role in cultural identity, political stability, and even individual morality. The gist of his essay is simply that food is so important on so many different levels that it is worthy of serious consideration. Though straightforward and indisputable, his premise was long ignored by scholars seeking greater complexity.

Subsequent essays embody this same spirit, though more through narrative than declaration. In fact, food history is the only unifying denominator among these writings. Each author branches off in a different direction, tackling food topics that span the globe and cover all facets of society. Though such a diversity of topics and approaches might undermine other edited volumes, causing them to seem disjointed, it only bolsters Belasco's assertion that scholarly activity in food history is now widespread and legitimate. His proof is in the pudding—or rather in the analyses of donuts, pickles, and tortillas that greatly enrich the book.

Scranton and Belasco's manner of organizing their essay topics is less clear. They divide the volume into five separate parts, counting Belasco and Mintz's opening essays as Part One. Part Two, "The Construction of National Cuisines," comprises Kolleen Guy's essay, "Rituals of Pleasure in the Land of Treasures: Wine Consumption and the Making of French Identity in the Late Nineteenth Century"; Steve Penfold's "Eddie Shack Was No Tim Horton: Donuts and Folklore of Mass Culture in Canada"; and Richard R. Wilk's "Food and Nationalism: The Origins of 'Belizean Food.'" Though these three essays are excellent and certainly speak to food's key role in the formation of national identities, their unifying theme could be applied equally to most of the remaining contributions.

Scranton and Belasco term Part Three "The Business of Taste," and its common denominator is the story of how commercial interests introduced their products to consumers, resulting in new consumption patterns and altered conventions of childrearing, food preservation, and crop production. Amy Bentley presents "Inventing Baby Food: Gerber and the Discourse of Infancy in the United States." Martin Bruegel analyzes the acceptance of new foodways in "How the French Learned to Eat Canned Food, 1809–1930s." Completing the section is Jeffrey Charles's "Searching for Gold in Guacamole: California Growers Market the Avacado, 1910–1994." Though topically diverse, these three articles are interesting, informative, and well written.

Parts Four and Five offer work of equally high quality. "Ethnicity, Class, and the Food Industry" features Tracey Deutsch's "Untangling Alliances: Social Tensions Surrounding

Independent Grocery Stores and the Rise of Mass Retailing”; Donna Gabbacia’s “As American as Budweiser and Pickles? Nation-Building in American Food Industries”; and Sylvia Ferrero’s “*Comida si par*. Consumption of Mexican Food in Los Angeles: Foodscapes in a Transnational Consumer Society.” Part Five examines the interaction between food and politics, with Jeffrey Pilcher’s “Industrial Tortillas and Folkloric Pepsi: The Nutritional Consequences of Hybrid Cuisines in Mexico”; Keith Allen’s “Berlin in the Belle Epoch: A Fast Food History”; and Mauricio Borrero’s “Food and Politics of Scarcity in Urban Soviet Russia, 1917–1941.” Here too the topics seem highly eclectic, but the collective level of research and writing is nevertheless excellent.

Perhaps the only difficulty with this collection is the wide-ranging scope of its topics. A reader unfamiliar with the development of the field might wonder how pickles fit together with Belizean food, or how folklore connects with political control. Put in historiographic context, however, the book’s eclectic organization makes perfect sense. As a single volume, the theme is clear: food is important. Belasco and Scranton have chosen essays that demonstrate the breadth of food-history research, and they document how food affects mass behavior, political power, and ethnic identity. They convey the message that food is a central factor in society and life and should no longer be ignored by elitist, supposedly serious, scholars. That declaration, in itself, is significant. Their book both announces and symbolizes the legitimization of a new subdiscipline of history. Its contributing scholars are certainly first rate and serious. *Food Nations* is a positive achievement for Warren Belasco and Philip Scranton, but even more, it represents a victory for scholars engaged in the study of food.

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