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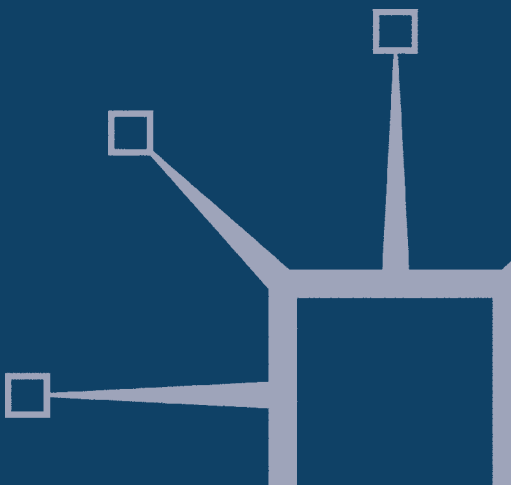
Dining on Turtles

Food Feasts and Drinking in History

Edited by

Diane Kirkby and Tanja Luckins



Dining on Turtles

Also by Diane Kirkby

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Diane Kirkby is Reader in History at La Trobe University in Melbourne, where she teaches food and drink history along with Australian and US social, cultural and gender history. She has written several books and numerous articles including *Barmaids: A History of Women's Work in Pubs* (Cambridge University Press, 1997). She has held Research Fellowships at the universities of Oxford, Edinburgh, Wisconsin and New York and has won awards for her research from the State Library of New South Wales, the Australian Historical Association, and the Centre for Australian Cultural Studies, Canberra.

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Chris McConville has taught at several Australian universities and currently teaches in history and urban planning at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland. He previously ran a business as a heritage, landscape and conservation researcher, and has worked in local and

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Barbara Santich is a culinary historian and food writer, currently Program Manager of the Le Cordon Bleu Graduate Program in Gastronomy at the University of Adelaide. This is one of the few postgraduate programs to offer students the opportunity to graduate with the degree of Master of Arts in Gastronomy. She is the author of six books, including *The Original Mediterranean Cuisine: Medieval Recipes for Today* (Wakefield Press, 1995), *What the Doctors Ordered: 150 Years of Dietary Advice in Australia* (Hyland House, 1995) and *In the Land of the Magic Pudding: A Gastronomic Miscellany* (Wakefield Press, 2000).

Alex Tyrrell is an Associate of the History Program at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia. He was born in Scotland and educated at Edinburgh and McMaster Universities. His most recent books are *The People's Bread. A History of the Anti-Corn Law League* (Leicester University Press, 2000), co-authored with Paul Pickering; and *Contested Sites: Commemoration, Memorial and Popular Politics in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Ashgate, 2004), edited and co-authored with Paul Pickering and other scholars. He has published several articles on national identity in Scotland and is a speaker at Scottish festivities in Victoria.

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Introduction: Of Turtles, Dining and the Importance of History in Food, Food in History

Diane Kirkby, Tanja Luckins and Barbara Santich

When a group of gentlemen of the Royal Society in London sat down to their turtle dinner in 1783, they were simultaneously enjoying fine dining and participating in an act of colonialism. Turtle soup was all the rage in England in the eighteenth century. By the second half of the eighteenth century turtle was recognised as 'a key dish of grand English cuisine', with the first recipes for turtle having appeared by 1750.[1] Hannah Glasse explained 'How to dress a Turtle the West India Way' in her *Art of Cookery* (1743): this involved bleeding, dissecting, soaking and cleaning the guts, then boiling, stewing and baking various parts. From this came various courses. The turtle could be baked or roasted but this was an acquired skill.[2] Its status was such that 'imitation' turtle dishes were soon included in later eighteenth century cookbooks and, by the nineteenth century, mock turtle soup, as mentioned in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and made with calf's head (less expensive than green turtle) plus seasonings and wine, featured regularly in formal menus for civic banquets. Instructions from *The Bath Cookery Book* (1790) indicate it was custom at the time to serve turtle as five separate dishes: the calipee (white belly meat), calipash (dark back meat), fricassee, soup and fins, which were served in a clear, madeira-flavoured broth, which could make a 'turtle dinner' on their own.[3] Thus for the gentlemen of the Royal Society the menu for the occasion read:

A Turtle
Scate
Harricot of Mutton
a Hare
another dish of Turtle

Potatoes
cold Ribs of Lamb
Breast of Veal
Haddock
more of the Turtle[4]

How they came to be eating turtle is perhaps an even more significant historical story. The European expansion into the 'New World' of the Americas in 1492 was, in part and indirectly, inspired by food – the appetite for spices in medieval Europe particularly among the wealthy classes. Spices came from East India and present-day Indonesia, via India in a trade that was largely controlled by Arabs. If spices could be sourced directly and imported without recourse to Arab middlemen, the prospects were there for potentially enormous profits: a cargo of silk, spices and pepper delivered to Venice returned a dividend of about 1000 per cent, and Venetian merchants could expect a further profit of 100 per cent in the next stage of commerce when the spices were sold in the consuming countries of Europe.[5]

Food from the 'New World' such as sugar, tea, coffee and chocolate became both popular foods and prized commodities in Europe. In the eighteenth century average per capita consumption of sugar in England rose seven and half times, while English imports of tea increased more than one hundredfold between 1711 and 1791. Other foods were prized not as commodities but as symbols of prestige. The turtle was one such food. London, the commercial and cultural capital of empire, was where men of wealth and taste could find the turtle, most of which were brought back from the Caribbean. According to Archie Carr, the green turtle was 'herbivorous, abundant and edible . . . as big as a heifer, easy to catch and easy to keep alive on its back in a space no greater than itself. It was an ideal food resource . . . fed a host of people and to some of them it became a dish of almost ceremonial stature'.[6]

Botanist and patron of science Joseph Banks feasted on turtles on his voyages to the Pacific with Captain James Cook in 1768–71. He appreciated the turtle in its natural state: the 'turtles are certainly far preferable to any I have eat in England, which must proceed from their being eat fresh from the sea before they have either wasted away their fat, or by unnatural food which is given them in tubs where they are kept given themselves a fat of not so delicious a flavour as it is in their wild state'.[7] A member of the Royal Society, Banks also belonged to the Royal Society Club, a dining club composed of Fellows of the Society. The dining club held regular dinners which were financed through their

annual subscription of one guinea.[8] The prospect of a turtle dinner invariably attracted a large group of diners, and the donor of a turtle was always made an honorary member of the dining club.[9]

In 1783 Joseph Banks had been keeping a turtle in his London house. In October he wrote to a dining club colleague, 'Out of his element is my poor Turtle I suppose. If he is at any time in danger if his Life, I beg it may be saved by an incision in his Throat, & his body presented to the Club.'[10] Banks' fears were realised. The turtle was 'far from well', and Mr Simpkin of the Crown & Anchor had reported that the weather was too cold for it to be kept in water and that it should be allowed to crawl about the kitchen and be wrapped in a blanket at night. Simpkin determined that the turtle 'having shown strong symptons of mortality, had its throat cut upon a general consultation'. The British could colonise the Caribbean but could not civilise the turtle it would seem. The turtle was eventually prepared for a dinner on 23 October 1783, 'Simpkin having cut away all the suspicious parts, also made three tureens of soup.' The Royal Club diners declared Banks' turtle 'very good and well cooked; but not to be compared with a plain turtle steak or cutlet'.[11]

Dining on turtle, brought from the Caribbean to cold wet England, in an elaborate ritual of prestige and taste, required systems of trade and communication, transport, monetary exchange and knowledge of cooking techniques that came together at that historical moment to create that particular experience. The how, when and why of these connections between political and economic changes, the experiences of feasting and drinking, and the communities in which they occurred, are profoundly historical questions.

Historians are newcomers to the study of food. While economic historians have long made food and agriculture a central subject of their discipline, it is nevertheless, as Warren Belasco claims, 'safe to say that food has until quite recently been largely invisible in academic history'.[12] Other disciplines – sociology, anthropology, archaeology, museum, language and literature studies – long ago recognised the significance of food in culture and society. They have made valuable contributions to understandings of ritual, symbolism, diet, etiquette and manners, among other topics.[13] Food history has rapidly gained strength and credibility in the past 40 or so years, and there are now significant numbers of historians working in the field. Only recently have more than a few historians moved beyond the study of diet and nutrition to explore the wider experiences and meanings of cultures of eating and drinking in specific times and places, the rise of gastronomy, the histories of specific foods and cooking practices. A search in the catalogue of any large

university library using the keywords 'food' and 'history' would reveal that more than 80 per cent of food history titles have been published since 1980.

The call to arms came from French historian Fernand Braudel in 1961, in an issue of *Annales: Economies, Societies, Civilisations*. Braudel called for an 'enquête ouverte' or open enquiry into what he called 'vie matérielle' or material life – a vague title, he acknowledged, but extraordinarily diverse, taking not only an historical perspective but also including insights from geography, anthropology, sociology, economy, demography, folklore, linguistics, medicine, statistics and many other disciplines.[14] Material life, he elaborated, encompassed five closely related areas: food; housing and clothing; standards of living; techniques; and biological characteristics. The problem, however, was not so much to define material life as to relate it to economic and/or social conditions. Of these five areas, Braudel proposed that the enquiry should start with the 'histoire de l'alimentation', or history of food and diet (the English language does not have an exact counterpart to the French 'alimentation', which refers not only to diet in both a quantitative and qualitative sense but also to provisioning). What he envisaged and outlined was more akin to dietary or nutritional history, an evaluation of what past societies or communities ate in nutritional terms (protein, fat, carbohydrate, minerals, vitamins), and the implications of their nutritional status.

Braudel broadened the scope of *l'histoire de l'alimentation* in a subsequent issue of the same journal in 1961, with his proposal to look also at the history of the movements of food plants such as sugar cane and coffee. Nevertheless, he recommended that food history research should focus on majorities, the ordinary masses, looking at both short-term and long-term changes, rather than on the better-documented meals of the privileged few.[15] A more important broadening of the boundaries occurred with the publication, also in *Annales* in 1961, of Roland Barthes' famous article 'Towards a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption'. It includes the now much-quoted passage: 'For what is food? It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviour.'[16]

European historians responded to the *Annales* challenge, and in the 20 years to 1980 the journal published some 66 articles on food history. The early ones followed closely the directions indicated by Braudel – 'Régimes alimentaires dans la France du XVIIe siècle' (Seventeenth century diets

in France), 'Les rations alimentaires de l'armée et de la marine anglaise au XVIe siècle' (Food rations in the English army and navy in the sixteenth century). At the same time, scholars began to realise some of the methodological problems associated with such research – the gaps in the records, the limitations of the data – and the multiplicity of possible directions.

In the following decade, the narrow focus on diet, rations and consequent nutritional status had all but disappeared, as had the section of the journal devoted to them (Dossier: Histoire de la Consommation – History of Consumption, which was itself a more general category than 'Vie matérielle et comportement biologique'). In 1975 *Annales* published an article by Jean-Paul Aron on the trade in food leftovers in Paris in the second half of the nineteenth century, while in 1977 it published an analysis by Jean-Claude Bonnet of the food- and cuisine-related entries of Diderot's encyclopedia. By 1975 Maurice Aymard could delineate what he considered the three principal strands of food history research: psycho-sociological (taking into account the symbolic values of foods); macroeconomic (statistical estimates of food supplies); nutritional (estimating nutritional status and its implications).[17]

The real expansion of food history studies began in the 1980s. At the start of the decade a small number of French researchers, from a variety of disciplines but all undertaking food history research, formed a group under Jean-Louis Flandrin at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (located in the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Institut Fernand Braudel). In 1981, Oxford historian Theodore Zeldin and ex-diplomat Alan Davidson initiated the Oxford Symposium on Food & Cookery, now an annual event. Davidson had previously, in November 1979, launched a small, scholarly food journal, *Petits Propos Culinaires* (initially intended as a single issue), described as 'Essays and notes to do with food, cookery and cookery books'. A number of significant and influential books were published – such as Michael Symons' history of eating in Australia, *One Continuous Picnic* (1983); Steven Kaplan's *Provisioning Paris: Merchants and Millers in the Grain and Flour Trade During the Eighteenth Century* (1984) and Stephen Mennell's *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present* (1985). Finally, associations such as Culinary Historians of Boston and Culinary Historians of New York were formed in the early 1980s (there are now many more associations of culinary historians in the USA). In 1984 the American Institute of Wine and Food began publishing its journal, the *Journal of Gastronomy*, and the following year the academic journal *Food & Foodways* was launched.

What was once either taken for granted or deemed not worthy enough as a topic of historical inquiry is now the focus of scholarship. As historians have brought their analytical skills into engagement with the fruits of other disciplinary labours the result has been a widening and deepening of our knowledge of historical change and past societies. Historians pose questions about social and power relations, temporal and spatial context and the changing dynamics of these to go beyond the details of artefacts, the preservation of heritage or the collection of information. The field of food studies has much to gain from the involvement of historians.

Historians too have much to gain from focussing on food, on remembering, as one historian reminds us, 'that history is also about "the animal reality of our living existence" '.[18] As James McWilliams has argued, food is important politically and not always in the obvious ways. In the American colonies food contributed significantly to the political philosophy that drove the colonists to revolution. Not having to import food made them independent and able to pursue radical ideas. Self-sufficiency shaped those ideas. Food, McWilliams says, was 'the obvious manifestation' of the eighteenth century concept of virtue that underlay the revolutionary impulse.[19] William McNeill argues that the potato changed the course of world history once it was adopted into the European diet. As in Ireland, where there was a population increase of 300 per cent between 1780 and 1840, the German population also increased after the acceptance of potatoes because they not only yielded two to four times more calories per acre than did grain, but could be grown in previously unproductive fallow fields. Even when the population grew as a result of increased food supplies, more people had enough to eat. As a consequence, writes McNeill, 'the industrial transformation of northern Europe could and did proceed at a very rapid rate'.[20]

Ancient historians have written about the importance of food and banquetting in the ancient world.[21] Other historians, too, have found that a focus on food illuminates historical events in surprising ways. Hasia Diner has presented new perspectives on immigration history through her comparative analysis of Italian, Jewish and Irish immigrant foodways in the United States.[22] Ken Albala has challenged views of health in the Italian Renaissance.[23] Donna Gabaccia and Jeffrey Pilcher have examined food's importance in its more usual role as marker of ethnic identity in specific communities.[24] English scholars such as John Burnett and James Walton have explored food's importance in understanding the history of the working class.[25] Gilly Lehmann's history of cooking and cookbooks in eighteenth century Britain shows how

cookbook readership gradually extended further down the social scale to include an increasing proportion of servants.[26] This shift in the intended audience for cookbooks had relevance for the colonies where the knowledge of culinary skills, availability of domestic help, experiences in running a household have all been subjects of historical enquiry. In Australia the establishment of cookery classes for girls in public schools and to the development of courses at technical colleges to train cookery teachers have been explored by historians of education. The emphasis on sweet dishes in the eighteenth century, when baking pies and tarts developed as an English speciality, continued in early Australian cookbooks. There are questions here about women's colonial history that are exposed through the lens of food.[27]

A focus on food and drink can lead to new explanations of the past, as the research by A. Lynn Martin on the drinking habits of Europeans in late medieval and early modern Europe has suggested. Martin connected the high levels of alcohol consumption, particularly among women, in the period from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century with modern research on foetal alcohol syndrome, thereby suggesting that the drinking patterns of that time could account for the high rates of infant and child mortality.[28]

Similarly, the history of camembert in France gives insights into the increasing polarisation of the modern food supply where tradition and individuality are juxtaposed with mass-production and standardisation. Camembert is (or was in the 1980s, when Pierre Boisard was researching the history) the most popular cheese in France; on average, every household was eating nearly two camembert per week.[29] Boisard attributes this to its relative cheapness, which in turn is a consequence of industrialisation of production, which itself was a response to the popularity and reputation of the cheese. While most camembert in France is factory-produced, according to standardised and mechanised processes, a small proportion is still produced following traditional methods (even though the camembert 'tradition' dates from only about the time of the French Revolution). Traditional camembert, says Boisard, 'depends on the valorisation of local specificities supported by a network of personalised relations'.[30] It costs about two or three times as much as its industrial counterpart, and has a distinctive, relatively strong flavour. Most consumers, however, prefer a relatively bland cheese, consistent in appearance, taste and texture. The two types of camembert are not only produced in different ways in different locations, they have different clienteles, who make their purchases in different outlets, who have different spending powers, different taste preferences, and different

degrees of respect for 'tradition'. In other words, there are two totally different circuits of production and distribution. This history of camembert offers insights into the evolution of the food industry, industrialisation and patterns of consumer preference. It also highlights themes of traditionalism and innovation in communities.

Food is significant not only in its material aspects but in its symbolic aspects – the meanings attached to eating, to particular foods, to particular methods of food preparation and distribution. Food history adds to and enriches our understanding. What values influenced food preferences, and why certain foods were not eaten tells us about the beliefs, attitudes and values of past societies. In the words of John Super, 'food is the ideal cultural symbol that allows the historian to uncover hidden levels of meaning in social relationships and arrive at new understandings of the human experience'.[31] It offers new paradigms, new perspectives, new avenues of understanding.

For some scholars food opens up profound and disturbing questions. Diana Wylie has importantly shown how food can reveal a darker side of history in her analysis of the growth of white supremacy in South Africa. An ideology of racism was based on knowledge of the foods Africans ate and the view that if they were hungry it was because they didn't know how to feed themselves.[32] In a similar vein Tim Rowse has examined the power dynamics of colonialism through the food rationing system whereby Aboriginal Australians were provided with foodstuffs (flour, sugar, tea) in an unequal exchange of colonial power relations.[33] Judith Carney's powerful study of the transfer of rice cultivation from Africa to the slave plantations of the southern United States not only opens an important new window onto making the Atlantic world and the history of slavery, but also shows another way in which Africans contributed culturally and technologically to United States' history.[34] There are also numerous economic and business histories of diet, commodities, staples, agriculture, the international meat trade, brewing and canning, industrial food production, as well as social histories of drinking and consumption, famines and soup kitchens that contribute importantly to our knowledge of food but do not generally fall into the scope of the new field of food history. The field is either impossibly broad or as yet insufficiently defined.

This collection of essays is a contribution to this emerging field. Explored here in case studies offering new insights into social and cultural history are themes of national identity, industrialisation, cosmopolitanism, political power and prestige, gender relations, popular culture, trade, memory, working-class sociability, migration, community

and landscape. These themes are a part of case studies which range temporally from banquets in ancient Rome to the memories of twentieth century Greek Cypriot emigrants; and geographically from the north American fur trade to whisky, haggis and celebrations of Scottishness in England, Scotland and Port Phillip District (Victoria). The topics are no less ambitious: feasts in Renaissance Italy; cosmopolitanism, food, drink and the 1956 Olympic Games; the reform of popular drinking in late medieval and early modern Europe; taverns and male sociability in early modern rural France; and the intimate relationship between food, pubs and the industrial working-class.

The case studies use a wide range of sources, sometimes in order to look at well-known themes and topics afresh and at other times to reveal the links between food and broader historical issues. Thus, the community cookbook, one of the most popular genres of cookbooks, may be seen not only as an artefact of cultural production but an important constituent in the making of 'civil society' in colonial societies, notably the development of gendered community institutions. A sixteenth century banquet management guide thus becomes more than a prescriptive guide to the elaborate preparation and display of food, music, entertainment, perfumes and flowers: it was a form of propaganda – a superb form of advertisement – for the small Italian courts as they hoped to become the model of sophistication and refined taste for their larger neighbours such as France and Spain. Oral history becomes a unique tool to look afresh at the role food plays in the memories of emigrants, not only to describe the important link between emotions, memory and food but to analyse the broader context of economic, social and political changes in which they arise. In a similar way, to look at sugar from the perspective of cane farmers allows the history of sugar to be considered in new ways. The distinctive cultural landscape created by cane farming thus becomes a part of the process of vernacular cane farming sustained over generations, in addition to the popular historical understanding of sugar as a commodity.

This volume originated in a conference of historians at the Australian Historical Association meeting in the rural town of Mildura located on the River Murray in the north-western corner of the state of Victoria, Australia in September 2003. Mildura is a grape-growing region, famous for its dried fruits industry, its wineries and its historical origins as an experiment in irrigation by the Canadian-born Chaffey brothers. Today it is renowned for its award-winning restaurant owned by chef Stefano de Pieri who brought national attention to the region with a popular television series on food and produce and the publication of cook books

such as *A Gondola on the Murray: A Feast by the River*.[35] Not surprisingly a major theme of the conference – called *Feast by the Murray* – was food and drink history. Its success led to the idea of publishing this collection and the solicitation of further papers from other scholars to produce a volume that is coherent, wide-ranging and innovative.

It is rare to have a collection that draws only on the work of historians. It is also rare to have a work with so much Australian content. Food history has a strong if still quite small following in Australia that was significantly boosted by the establishment of the Research Centre for the History of Food and Drink at the University of Adelaide which holds a regular international conference. There have been several publications flowing from presentations at that conference which are not concentrated on Australian topics but which, like this volume, incorporate Australian material in a global context.[36] Most of the contributors to this volume work in Australia although the temporal and geographic scope of the contents, as well as the issues, reach well beyond the boundaries of Australia's history. We are confident that the studies contained in this work will illuminate the existing history of food and drink and stimulate further research not only empirically but also, we hope, in conceptualising the field.

Notes

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2. K. Albala, *Food in Early Modern Europe* (Westport: Greenwood, 2003), p. 76.
3. Lehmann, *British Housewife*, p. 259.
4. T. E. Allibone, *The Royal Society and its Dining Clubs* (Exeter: Pergamon, 1976), pp. 120–1.
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6. A. Carr, *So Excellent a Fishe: A Natural History of Sea Turtles* (New York: Natural History Press, 1967), p. 13.
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