

FOODS and FOOD EXCHANGE

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Food History. Food history has been gaining ground in the past two decades, and quite properly: it's a fundamental component of human history. Several facets draw attention. Exchanges of food from one society to the next obviously build on world historians' interest in the results of contact. Trade patterns also loom large, for certain kinds of foods have long featured strongly in transregional commerce. There is also the intriguing issue of taste, particularly when different regions encounter each other: how much change is possible here, and what causes both interest and constraint?

Trade. Bulk foods were not widely exchanged among different regions until the 18th century, for perishability and slow transport imposed obvious limitations. Key regions, however, early focused on internal exchange. The government in classical China thus built north-south canals to facilitate movement of rice to the north, grain to the south. Classical Greece and particularly Rome worked hard to promote trade in grain, from fertile regions such as North Africa and Sicily, in return for grapes and olives produced closer to home. Salt was traded even more widely, as an essential preservative as well as condiment. And transregional trade early developed in key spices, with southeast Asia and India the major production centers. Pepper was widely sought, and historians have debated whether this resulted from a desire to mask slightly spoiled meat or a more refined taste; Rome organized regular Indian Ocean trade with India (from the Red Sea) to gain spices, and south European wines were traded in the Indian Ocean as well. Chinese interest in tea encouraged wider trade with southeast Asia. Later, sugar promoted even wider trade and exploitation. Persians learned of sugar from India, and Arabs later encouraged production. Europeans learned from the Arabs – for example, as a side effect of the Crusades – yet Europe could not produce cane sugar on its own. Interest not only in trade but in colonies that could grow sugar directly provided substantial motivation for European expansion and exploitation of slave labor. Coffee, initially exported to the Middle East from Ethiopia, tea and chocolate were other luxury food items that began to win mass interest, particularly in Europe, by the early modern period.

Food Exchange. Food exchange – where one region learned of foods grown elsewhere and then introduced the crops or animals directly – was even more important than trade, at least until the 19th century, because it could affect fundamental production capacity. Sub-Saharan African agriculture depended greatly on these imports: millet and various sorghums from the Middle East, which helped establish African agriculture in the first place; and (probably as a result of Indian Ocean migrations, for example to Madagascar) yams and the banana from southeast Asia, both of which were quickly incorporated into basic diets. Knowledge of meat-producing domesticated animals spread as well. Use of pigs thus spread from the Middle East to Europe, probably from an initial base in Africa. More limited exchanges included, for example, Italians importing a new form of wheat from North Africa in the postclassical period, which turned out to be particularly suited for pasta products.

The Columbian Exchange. The contacts between the Americas and the rest of the world from 1492 onward involved extensive food exchange. Overall, the result was to improve global agricultural capacity and the ability to support larger populations. It's been estimated that about a third of the foods consumed today around the world are of "American" origin. This includes potatoes and sweet potatoes, corn in some cases (China, Africa; but in Europe corn is mainly seen as a food for animals), ultimately tomatoes (though they were not found acceptable until the 19th century), pumpkins (widely used in parts of Africa), and various spicy peppers that were quickly incorporated into the cuisine of India and parts of China (Szechuan). American options were greatly expanded by the new chance to grow other grains and the new array of domesticated animals whose meats became available. These exchanges were affected both by opportunity and by taste. China had no direct links with the Americas, but learned of new foods from the Philippines, where Spaniards began to expand options in hopes of encouraging population growth. Europeans long feared or disliked American foods, because they were not mentioned in the Bible and might be seen as a source of disease. Thus widespread use of the potato, which would dramatically change European eating habits and population base, began only in the 1680s, after which both farmers and some governments deliberately encouraged this efficient crop. The tomato was long held back by disease fears. Native Americans found European grains rather dry, long preferring corn products; Europeans in the Americas, unlike their more conservative cousins, more quickly moved to accept crops like corn.

The Long 19th Century. By 1750 basic foods were widely known throughout most of the world, even though tastes varied and of course regional suitabilities for some crops and animals varied as well. The big news from this point onward was increasing need and opportunity to trade in some basic foods, to help support growing urban and industrial populations initially in Europe. By the later 18th century Europe, and particularly Britain, was importing considerable amounts of grain from Poland and Russia, which in turn helped confirm these regions in a primary focus on agriculture and, for many decades, on the labor of serfs. The early decades of the 19th century saw intense debates in Britain about whether to encourage food trade or to protect domestic agriculture, with the ultimate decision in the 1840s going in favor of trade and food dependency (repeal of the Corn Laws, 1846). After 1850 improvements in shipping speed and capacity encouraged massive European food imports from the Americas and Australia/New Zealand. This was further enhanced by the development, after 1870, of canning and of refrigeration. But many regions, including Japan as it industrialized, continued to face the tension between protection of local, though often expensive, agriculture and fuller embrace of reliance on imports.

Tastes. More extensive global exchanges also affected food tastes, as people in some regions had growing opportunity to encounter other cuisines. French restaurants became fashionable for upper-class urban Americans from the 1840s onward. Chinese restaurants spread as well. Initially established by Chinese immigrants for their fellows, particularly in railway labor camps, they began to be modified to suit wider American tastes. Pizza, another import, began to be popular from the 1880s onward. European restaurants began to diversify amid influences from Asia, while leading urban centers around the world found they had to develop Western-style offerings to keep their imperial patrons happy.

Contemporary Developments. The global patterns of the long 19th century continued in many ways, particularly after World War II. Food products that were once regional specialties – like the New Zealand kiwi – became available year round thanks to new opportunities for shipping. Urban centers around the world developed similar arrays of restaurant options: whether in China or Dubai or London or Cape Town, opportunities to choose an Italian, or Korean, or Indian restaurant abounded. Regional preferences and styles continued, but amid much greater variety at least for more affluent urbanites and travelers. The most important developments, however, focused on the increasing popularity of Western-style diets and the striking new interest in fast food options developed initially in the United States. Growing industrial prosperity created a larger urban middle class in countries like China or South Africa that sought to increase meat consumption, and particularly beef. Fast food outlets, initially designed to meet American needs for quick options that would not delay return to work or leisure and that could handle family dining, spread widely as well, as they took root from the 1950s onward. Outlets like McDonalds made some bows to local tastes – for example, more vegetarian options in India; teriyaki possibilities in Japan – but their foods and their global prestige provided the most important lures. These changes had a number of effects. More meat production had huge effects on the environment, encouraging deforestation in places like Brazil to meet the new demand for beef. Obesity rates increased worldwide. What had once been the classic global problem – famine or undernutrition – was now reversed in many regions, as food supply grew, new packaging created novel opportunities for snacks, and for many adults and children physical exertion declined. Dire famine remained, most obviously in over-farmed parts of sub-Saharan Africa, or in situations of war or civil unrest. But the larger global food-health relationship was much more novel, and no clear solution had yet emerged.

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Suggested Reading:

Food in World History. By Jeffrey Pilcher (Routledge, 2005).

We Are What We Eat Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans. By Donna R. Gabaccia (Harvard University Press, 2000).

Suggested classic - *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. By Sidney W. Mintz (Penguin, 1986).

Discussion

1. What social and cultural changes occurred with food exchanges and food globalization?
2. How did food move as a result of the Columbian Exchange? What is the Neo-Columbian Exchange?
3. Pick one of the three following regions, Western Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, China, and discuss its role in world food history.
4. How can food history contribute to gender history?
5. What is gastronomy? Describe its historical development.
6. How have food systems changed in the 20th century?
7. Discuss the significance and limitations of food history as a field in world history.