Culinary history

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Food history is a broad academic discipline encompassing many varied methodologies and theoretical positions, and employs practically any written document or artifact from the past as primary source material on which research is based. It employs both qualitative and quantitative approaches and borrows conceptual models freely from other disciplines. As a distinct subset of this larger field is culinary history, which is concerned foremost with what people in the past actually cooked, how and where food was served, and what particular dishes meant to the people who ate them. As such it focuses primarily on cookbooks, but also related gastronomic literature such as restaurant reviews, menus, guidebooks, and a wealth of related writings on diet, farming, herbal lore as well as historic cooking implements, paintings of kitchen scenes and historic sites related to food. The ultimate goal of culinary history is to engage with the past via food practices, largely from an aesthetic vantage point rather than as a means to discovering attitudes about class, gender, race, and other cultural values. The latter falls under the category of the social and cultural history of food.

Historical background

Culinary history is in fact among the oldest varieties of food history, stretching back to Athenaeus in third-century Naucratis, Egypt. His *Deipnosophistae*, recording banquets and eating habits of the ancient world, might be considered the first culinary history in the Western tradition. Within this work, for example, survive fragments of the oldest cookbook written by Athenaeus, who lived in Greek Sicily in the fourth century BCE. Comparable culinary histories exist outside the Western tradition as well, for example the “food canons” (*Shih ching*) by Meng Shen, written in the seventh century in T’ang Dynasty China, chronicles the origin and usage of every food consumed at court and grown in the imperial gardens. Renaissance humanists also commented upon the food customs and cooking methods of the ancients. Titles such as *Antiquitatum Convivialium* of J. Guglielmus Stuckius, Julius Caesar Bulengerus’s *De conviviis libris quatuor* and Erycius Puteanus’s *Reliquae convivii prisci* were all sophisticated culinary histories. These were professional scholars, and conducted research not essentially different from that done today. That is, they were not merely chronicling great feasts, but analyzing ancient food texts with a critical eye to understanding the gastronomic values and practices of the past.

Despite a few very early printed editions of historic cookbooks, such as that attributed to the Roman gourmand Apicius, or editions of medieval cookbooks printed in the late eighteenth
and early nineteenth century, such as Richard Warner’s *Antiquitates Culinariae*, it was not until the latter twentieth century that a concerted effort to make historic culinary texts available for research was made. Nor until then did archives consciously collect gastronomic works for the use of scholars.

Moreover, until recently the history of cooking was taken up more often by antiquarians and popular food writers rather than academic historians. William Carew Hazlitt’s *Old Cookery Books and Ancient Cuisine* published in 1886 is characteristic of the first generation of this type of work. Similar popular titles continue to be published to this day. Academics have taken an interest only in the past few decades, though the field is still shared fairly equally with journalists and food writers. This has been to a great extent a boon, for while the scholars bring to the field rigorous methods of analysis and theoretical approaches to interpreting cooking texts, popular writers provide examples of lively engaging prose. Each influences the other in positive ways that few other food studies fields can boast.

Equally important is what has come to be called “living history” sites where historic cooking is presented to the public using authentic implements and fuel sources, often by people dressed in period costumes. Historic houses such as Hampton Court in the UK, Williamsburg and Plimouth Plantation in the US, Skanson outside Stockholm, which dates to the late nineteenth century, as well as working historic farms throughout Europe and the US, have reconstructed historic kitchens and cooked original recipes and were formerly even allowed to let visitors sample their work, before insurance companies and government safety regulations made this impossible. It is the synergy among these various practitioners of culinary history that has made it a dynamic and popular field.

Scholarly interest in culinary history may be said to have truly begun in the late nineteenth century, especially with the publication of the great bibliography of Georges Vicaire, which is still the standard reference work, though updated by the subsequent works of Bitting, Feret, and most recently Notaker. These simply collected for the first time bibliographic data on the full panoply of printed European cookbooks. Scholars began to notice the relationships among the printed cookbooks, those that borrowed from others, and in general how gastronomy progressed through the centuries.

Secondary works on food history with a largely gastronomic bent might look to the great chef Alexis Soyer’s *Pantropheon* as the forerunner in the field, though it was also responsible for many of the misconceptions perpetuated well into the twentieth century. Much of the work of culinary historians has in fact been to dispel various recurrent myths about food in the past and objectively assess old cookbooks without modern bias or sensational gawking at the strange and seemingly disgusting things people once ate. They are hard pressed not to romanticize the past as well. Modern surveys of food history, although not necessarily with a culinary focus include Reay Tannahill’s immensely popular *Food in History* first published in the 1970s, followed by the work of Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat, the landmark *Food: A Culinary History* edited by Jean-Louis Flandrin and Massimo Montanari, as well as the surveys of Felipé Fernandez-Armesto, Michael Symons, Linda Civitello, and more recently Paul Freedman.

Apart from the broader surveys two works in particular stand out as framing the dialogue and methodology of subsequent culinary histories: Stephen Mennell’s *All Manners of Food*, which compares French and English culinary fashion in the early modern era, and Barbara Wheaton’s *Savoring the Past*, which is about the development of French taste. Roughly contemporaneous with these was the work of literary scholars turning their attention to modern translations and editions of historic cookbooks; the work on medieval cookery by Constance Heiatt and Terence Scully is exemplary. Likewise a generation of historic cookery practitioners and commentators brought increased sophistication to the field, including Peter Brears, Charles Perry, Ivan Day, Karen Hess, Bruno Laurioux, and numerous others, including the cookbook authors Elizabeth David and Jane Grigson.
A number of food encyclopedias have also brought attention to cuisine as a legitimate field of study, again though not exclusively about cooking, they helped to popularize the topic. These include encyclopedias edited by Kenneth Kiple, Solomon Katz, Alan Davidson, and Andrew F. Smith. To these we should also add the numerous food series that are partly devoted to culinary history, such as those at the University of California Press, edited by Darra Goldstein, the University of Illinois, edited by Andrew F. Smith, Greenwood Press, edited by Ken Albala, as well as the food series at Routledge, Berg, Oxford, and Columbia Universities. A spate of single-subject food books starting with Redcliffe Salaman’s work on the potato, through Betty Fussell’s work on corn, Mark Kurlansky’s on cod, has also spawned a minor industry of similar works, many of which are directly concerned with cuisines of the past.

Perhaps more important than all these secondary works has been the new editions of historic cookbooks issued most notably by Prospect Books, Arnaldo Forni in Italy, Applewood Books, as well as academic publishers on both sides of the Atlantic. That is, the most important primary source material for this field has been published and often translated only in the past two decades.

Journals that focus on culinary history include Petits Propos Culinaires (in English despite the title); Food in History and several others regularly feature relevant topics, in particular Gastronomica, and occasionally Food Culture and Society and Food and Foodways. There is also the Italian Appunti di Gastronomia. Edward Behr’s The Art of Eating is also an excellent resource as are numerous newsletters (back issues of the now retired Food History News for example or the long defunct Journal of Gastronomy published the American Institute of Wine and Food). Slow Food also, not surprisingly, is often concerned with culinary history topics, reflected in its publications. Increasingly food blogs focusing on cuisine now proliferate, including websites like The Food Time Line.

The oldest continuing conference, which still remains the base for culinary historians, has been the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery founded by Alan Davidson and Theodore Zeldin. A congenial mix of academics, journalists, and enthusiasts, it continues to highlight some of the best work done in the field in its annual proceedings. Other conferences include the International Association of Culinary Professionals (IACP), who apart from the annual meeting also hold periodic conferences on food history, the International Ethnological Food Research Conference, which meets in a different European city every other year, the Institut Européen d’Histoire et des Cultures d’Alimentation (IEHCA) and the FOST Center in Brussels. The Association for the Study of Food and Society holds an annual conference and culinary history topics are certainly welcome there. Numerous cities in the US also boast active culinary history groups, the oldest of which are in Boston, New York, Southern California, Chicago, but also cities such as Austin, Ann Arbor, Washington, DC, and in Northern California also sponsor regular lecture series. Many of these groups organize regional conferences and offer scholarships and awards as well.

Food museums have also been an important part of the culinary history scene, such as the Southern Food and Beverage Museum in New Orleans and the Alimentarium in Vevey, Switzerland, or the now defunct Copia in Napa, California. Literally hundreds of small museums are connected to specific manufactured products or individual foods, such as the pasta museum in Rome or the Bad Reichenhaller Salt Museum in Germany. Larger museums such as the Smithsonian also regularly mount culinary exhibits; Julia Child’s kitchen, for example, is one of the most popular exhibits in the Museum of American History.

**How to get started**

The mere use of cookbooks as a primary source does necessarily denote an interest in cookery per se. Cookbooks can be read for any number of reasons: to discern gender roles, to understand the social meaning of ingredients or cooking methods or modes of service, to trace food materials
as they become available in markets through global trade. There are countless things gastronomic literature can reveal. The culinary historian is interested in the actual food, what was involved in its preparation and even how it tasted. To this end, culinary history is partly a species of archaeology and sometimes a recipe will only make sense after one has tried to cook it using original ingredients, historic implements and fuel sources and even period utensils.

Until recently culinary historians had to visit archives and rare book libraries to consult old cookbooks and culinary manuscripts. A good proportion of significant texts are still only found in such repositories. In the US the most important collections are found at the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe, Harvard University, the Clements Library at the University of Michigan, the New York Public Library and New York Academy of Medicine, as well as the Szamarthy archives at the University of Iowa, the Lilly collections at Indiana University, the Aresty Collection at the University of Pennsylvania, the Sheilds Library at the University of California Davis, and the Fales Library at New York University. Most rare book rooms in university libraries across the country hold a few important culinary texts, and one should not leave out the Library of Congress as well, especially the Pennell collection.

However, increasingly historic cookbooks and related gastronomic texts can be found online. Google Books is a remarkable resource, as are books on the Gutenberg site and the Feeding America site hosted by Michigan State, as well as Gallica at the Bibliotéque Nationale and the Fons Grew site at Barcelona. Independent groups also post electronic editions and translations, and many medieval cookbooks are easily found online, with mixed success. Thomas Gloning’s site is a good place to start for these: www.uni-giessen.de/gloning/kobu.htm (accessed on March 28, 2012). The majority of early modern cookbooks can be found on EEBO (Early English Books Online), though you need to be at a library that subscribes to this very expensive electronic archive.

**Research methodologies**

The first and most important thing to remember when working with historic cookbooks and gastronomic literature is that very rarely are they accurate records of what people actually ate. Sometimes they do record menus of meals eaten, but more often they are prescriptive rather than descriptive. That means a researcher can be sure that a cookbook reflects the ideas and values of the author and perhaps by extension a set of readers who purchased the book, but this is almost never an indication of exactly how people cooked or what they ate. This is true of the earliest Mesopotamian recipes recorded on cuneiform tablets, to medieval manuscripts right down to modern cookbooks. They are all largely aspirational, meaning that readers may have mined them for ideas, or imagined cooking from them, but they are not evidence of actual practice.

Nonetheless, they do offer a wealth of information. The best way to read such texts is first to be clear about what you are interested in learning. One might simply identify ingredients to start. These can be tabulated, even quantified. Quite simply one can ascertain what kind of ingredients were available, how popular they were, and also what might be conspicuous by its absence. It is important not to jump to conclusions though, as recipe books might exclude simple dishes assuming everyone knew how to cook them, or vegetable recipes for similar reasons. Because cookbooks were often written for wealthy readers, sometimes common or lowly dishes were excluded. By this logic, one should not assume, for example, the dearth of vegetable dishes in a medieval cookbook means that wealthy people did not eat vegetables. It may be that the author simply didn’t think they would be very impressive.

Next it is useful to identify fuel sources, cooking implements, and cooking methods. We are easily led astray by assumptions about modern cooking that seem to render directions confusing
or inaccurate. Because old cookbooks often lack cooking times or temperatures or are written in short-hand form for professionals, modern redactors often guess at their meaning. As in all historic research, the context is especially important here. One absolutely must begin with the assurance that old cookbook authors knew what they were doing and achieved results that to them were worthy of recording. Of course there are sometimes mistakes and printers’ errors, but if one assumes the recipe will not work, and consequently makes changes or substitutions, practically nothing will be learned about the past.

The context can be supplied by other gastronomic texts, images of cooking in old paintings, or even surviving implements in museums. For example, cooking in a suspended iron pot over a low flame will give very different results than in a modern stainless steel pot on a modern stove. Likewise roasting on a spit is nothing like baking in an oven or even using a modern rotisserie. While reading historic recipes, one must keep in mind a very different kind of kitchen.

Quite often a cookbook will also offer hints about who exactly is doing the cooking. It might be a professional for a large noble household. Quantities offer some clues, as does the source of ingredients. For example, if instructions include killing your animal first, this might point to a large estate or farm setting. If meat is bought already butchered and apportioned in small quantities, this might denote an urban setting. Sometimes the readership is directly addressed – it might be housewives, working-class mothers, bachelors, young inexperienced newlyweds. This will of course determine the cost and complexity of the recipes, the range of ingredients and equipment called for. Even when not directly addressed it is often possible to sleuth out exactly what kind of audience is targeted. Are the recipes meant to feed two people, or a small family; are they for everyday fare or special elaborate occasions? Is the book a small, cheap paperback or a large, expensive coffee table book or professional reference work? Cost alone is sometimes a good indication of the audience.

It is also useful to think about the ways ingredients are combined, the flavor combinations, condiments called for, and garnishes. These considerations will reveal an overall aesthetic sensibility that it might be possible to analyze in terms of historical progression. Art historians and music historians are accustomed to this kind of classification and categorization and they have a critical vocabulary for describing their subjects, often with precise periodization. In other words it is possible to describe cooking as being Baroque, Romantic, Modernist, much the same way other aspects of culture are described. Culinary history is only beginning to attain the sophistication of other disciplines in this regard.

One can also look for hints about presentation and service. Are there many courses, special utensils or serving dishes, table linens or napkins? Are there servants present to carve or apportion larger dishes, or ladle out soup? Is there a certain logic to the progression of the meal or is everything served at once? Does the author mention etiquette or seating arrangements or perhaps dining room decor? These are all ultimately relevant to gastronomy and changes in these aspects of dining may signal much broader cultural and social changes. A cookbook may also be explicitly connected to a restaurant, which offers an entirely different kind of information. Menus are naturally the best place to look for information about restaurant dining, but so too are advertisements, reviews, and culinary memoirs. Advertisements in newspapers, magazines and in more recent media are also invaluable sources for research on manufactured goods, especially those that are marketed as convenience foods. Some manufacturers also issued small cookbooks to accompany their products, or even put recipes right on boxes and cans. For a complete picture of the entire gastronomic scene it is important not to neglect any possible resource, including cookware and utensils, ovens and other kitchen appliances. These are all directly relevant to reconstructing the culinary past.
Cookbooks may also have a particular angle. They might have been compiled by a certain community or group, or might reflect a specific ethnic tradition or region. They may cater to a certain dietary program for weight loss or physical training. They might be written specifically for people with dietary restrictions, vegetarians, diabetics, or those with allergies. Or a cookbook may appeal to a certain aesthetic niche – using farmer’s market produce, using rare important ingredients, being sophisticated and authentic or homey and comforting. These are all important factors not only for discerning the values and preoccupations of the past, but also the gastronomic choices. Why, for example, do some cookbooks insist on fresh ingredients cooked from scratch while others use convenience foods and labor-saving devices? Why do some capitalize on the celebrity status of the author or advertise themselves as quick and convenient? For the culinary historian all these factors ultimately determine what ends up in the recipes.

Finally, the most important part of this research is actually cooking from historic texts. It is not of course requisite and many excellent studies in culinary history never take this final step. But in a certain sense it is like commenting on a painting without ever having seen it or on a piece of music without having heard it on period instruments. Tasting the past, coming to understand the embodied experience of cooks, and assessing the results aesthetically is only possible by getting a little messy. For the purposes of research rather than diverting entertainment, one must strictly adhere to the instructions offered. Substitutions will ruin the final affect. Modern cookware will tell you very little in the end. Original ingredients are a little harder since domesticated species of plants and animals have changed dramatically over time. A modern cut of pork, for example, might be quite different from what the author had in mind. Nonetheless, close approximation is possible. An onion is still essentially an onion. Assuming you have found all the ingredients and cookware and are using the proper fuel source, simply follow the instructions to the letter. The results are almost always astonishing.

For those foods that are not commonly described in detail, bread for example, fermented products such as pickles, cheese, or cured meats, the culinary historian must venture into less sure waters and delve into experimentation. Understanding that one can never replicate these exactly, especially since the ambient bacteria, weather conditions and myriad other factors will differ, it is still possible to reconstruct historic techniques, to at least gain a deeper understanding of these cooking and preservation methods by testing them. This type of work is akin to archaeological research that attempts to reconstruct foodways through interpreting replicas of physical remains in action. Authenticity is not really an issue here, it is more about understanding how an otherwise obscure object might have been used or how a technique was undertaken. The historian has the advantage of referring to surviving texts that offer clues about these processes, but again the extrapolation can only be an approximation.

Avenues for further research

Although many of the great classics in Western culinary history are now available in modern editions, the same can unfortunately not be said for the entire non-Western canon. The greatest single obstacle to the globalization of this field, to facilitate communication across language barriers, is the lack of translated sources. For speakers of English, there is practically nothing available as the basis for research. A few medieval sources from the Islamic world are now available, but almost nothing from Chinese or Indian culinary traditions, let alone from the rest of the world. Culinary history remains for the most part resolutely European and North American. There are no doubt people working on relevant topics elsewhere, but they are essentially cut off from the rest of the field.
Despite the coming of age of food studies in general, and the fact that food historians no longer have to explain what they do or struggle for respectability, the same cannot be said for culinary history. It does not have a firm foothold in academia and even among most professional food historians, it is an afterthought. There remains this lingering idea that somehow getting your hands dirty is not appropriate for detached scholarly inquiry. Perhaps for the same reason literary scholars don’t write poetry, art historians generally don’t paint and music historians don’t perform. Perhaps they should. For food history, the aesthetic side of the story is one that deserves greater scrutiny, in tandem with these other arts. Until that happens, culinary history will remain the poorer, if sometimes more popular, relative to food history and food studies in general.

Key reading

Encyclopedias, reference works, and surveys


Bibliography


Secondary sources


