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# ..Ambiguous Appetites

A MODERN HISTORY



Debates about the tasteful date back to ancient times, and stretch far beyond the kitchen. Not only do such debates reflect the ambiguity of the term “taste” itself, they also tell us much about different eras’ anxieties and social hierarchies. From the creators of a cuisine based on *le goût naturel* in the eighteenth century to the advocates of “real” food in the twenty-first century, arbitrators of culinary taste have long celebrated the fresh, simple and pure. At the same time, they have tended to obscure the history that has made these qualities appealing yet unevenly accessible.

**Keywords:** freshness, taste, natural foods, refrigeration

*De gustibus not est disputandum*: there is no disputing taste. Like many old sayings, it isn’t really true. People have argued about taste for centuries. Partly this owes to the ambiguity of the term itself. Dictionaries might distinguish between the physiological sense and the aesthetic judgment, between taste and Taste; in real-life discourse we do not always do so. Indeed, taste is arguably one of the most ambiguous notions confronting food scholars. But it is not the only one. Advertising and other media used to sell food—restaurant menus, say, or labels—abound with other examples, such as natural, healthy, pure, and (of particular interest to me) fresh. At one level, all these terms describe physical or material qualities, just like “taste” describes a physical sense. At another, they refer to ideals for living as well as eating—ideals that have become particularly important during certain historical periods.

Ambiguity can, and often does obfuscate. But it can also be instructive. Here I want to explore the modern history of the ambiguous meanings we attach to food and diet. I will do this in two parts. The first will examine some of the questions about taste that preoccupied the food world, particularly in France, from roughly the mid-seventeenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries. These were questions about what constituted “natural” taste, who was naturally best suited to produce and consume it, and what it was good for. And I want to show how these concerns were both products of larger developments (such as the Enlightenment and the emergence of industrial capitalism) and *productive* of new forms of status and authority, linked to food.

In the second part, I want to show preoccupations with taste were in some ways eclipsed by freshness. By this I certainly do not mean that people stopped caring about what was tasty or tasteful. But by the turn of the twentieth century, such concerns overlapped with (and were even expressed

as) questions about what was *fresh*. In other words, freshness became an increasingly attainable, desirable, yet also contested ideal for reasons that both reflected broader changes and appealed, as taste had in the past, to the insecurities and desires that those changes helped to bring about. This part of the story will focus mostly on the United States, not because the food is freshest, but rather because freshness as an ideal has become such an animating force in the American food supply and American-style capitalism more generally—both of which are clearly global in their influence.

Together, these overlapping histories show us that dominant norms about the “right” ways to eat are never merely about eating. It is useful to be reminded of this at a time when certain arbitrators of taste and freshness have parlayed dietary advice not just into fame and fortune, but also considerable social and political clout. It is useful to recall, in other words, that the advice dispensed—about what constitutes a natural and proper diet—has its own history, not natural at all.

An appropriate entry point to this history is the mid-seventeenth century, on the eve of what has been called France’s “revolution in taste” (Pinkard 2009). It was primarily a culinary revolution, in that it focused on matters of tasteful food production. Some of its products in turn fed the rise of early nineteenth-century gastronomy, and the related debates about who was naturally best-suited to tasteful consumption. All of this history has been extensively documented. Here I intend only to provide only a broad overview, in order to highlight the magnitude of the shifts and to set the stage for what came after.

What came before, in brief, were a few centuries when chefs did not aspire to the “natural.” On the contrary, they aimed to turn food into something that neither looked nor tasted like its raw ugly self. They aimed to create dishes that would impress diners with their artistry and exotic flavoring and that would also, in accordance with medieval dietetics, keep bodily humors in balance (Flandrin 1999; Laurioux 2002; Redon *et al.* 1998). In the mid-seventeenth century, however, French culinary style began to shift away from artifice and towards the “delicate cooking” that characterizes the country’s modern cuisine. Vanguard chefs called old recipes “barbaric,” and boasted of their culinary ability to reveal each dish’s *vrai gout* or *gout naturel*. Most things sweet and sculpted were relegated to the desserts course, while vegetables, or least some of them, gained new prominence on the best tables. Meanwhile spices, which became cheaper in major urban markets, were also losing their luxury status (Braudel 1981; Pinkard 2009: 67–72).

The *new* status foods were the premium ingredients on which the new cuisine depended. Fresh eggs, poultry and cream; perfectly ripe fruit, delicate greens—unlike spices, these foods perished quickly and were often scarce in urban markets. Hosts most likely to have them in their kitchens

were those who produced them on their own country estates, where well-kept orchards and kitchen gardens were status symbols in their own right (Quellier 2003).

Like many revolutions, this one saw plenty of factional infighting (Davis 2009). On one side, chefs and other proponents of the eighteenth century's *nouvelle cuisine* claimed it had classical roots but benefited from modern advances in agriculture, commerce and, above all, dietary hygiene. The gradual decline of humoral theory hardly meant that chefs could dispense with concerns about digestion. Instead they claimed that their scientific knowledge of food and the body—of the natural laws governing both—would assure that at each meal, to quote one cookbook author, “health and taste will both be satisfied” (Menon 1755: viii–ix).

On the other side were those who thought that refined cuisine based on *le gout naturel* was entirely unnatural, unhealthy and altogether decadent. What was natural was hunger, and it could be satisfied much more simply, without the interventions of overpaid celebrity chefs. This faction included the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who was not just a vegetarian but also something of a locavore. In *Emile* he pronounced, “My table shall not be decked with fetid splendor or putrid flesh from far off lands.” Of Paris's own local hothouse produce he said, “nothing is more insipid.” His ideal diet consisted of homegrown fruits and vegetables, bread, eggs, and lots of milk, cheese and butter. Ordinary servants, not a chef, would prepare whatever could not be eaten raw, straight off the tree. He called it a peasant diet, but it was one that most peasants could not actually afford (and given the absence of meat, probably would not have liked) (Rousseau 1979: 346; see also Hufton 1974).

Another critic of the new cuisine was the Chevalier Louis de Jaucourt, a physician, philosopher, and major contributor to Diderot's *Encyclopedia*, the central reference text of the French Enlightenment. Cuisine he defined as the “science of the gullet,” a “tricky art” used to get people to eat “beyond what is necessary.” His entry on the topic described a dietary decline and fall:

Dairy, honey, the fruits of the land, vegetables seasoned with salt, bread cooked in embers, these were the foods of the first peoples of the earth. They made use of these benefits of nature without any other refinement and were as a result only stronger, more robust, and less exposed to disease ... (Diderot *et al.* 1976)

But, he goes on:

... this temperance did not last long: the habit of always eating the same things ... engendered disgust; disgust gave birth to curiosity ... Man tasted, tried, diversified, chose, and came to make an art of the most simple and natural action [i.e. eating]. (Diderot *et al.* 1976)

Clearly this was not an art he approved of. And this disdain appeared elsewhere in the encyclopedia, where writers such as Voltaire went on at length about the “natural laws” of tasteful painting, music and poetry, but dismissed food as, well, just food. Something to consume, not contemplate.<sup>1</sup>

Notably, both sides of the debate over the new cuisine—those who thought that its refinement enhanced the natural taste and nutrition of food as well as the diner’s natural sense of taste, versus those who thought it corrupted all these things—shared a nostalgia for the supposedly more authentic, wholesome diet of the countryside. This nostalgia, moreover, stretched across the upper tiers of the French social hierarchy. In the 1770s, the young Marie Antoinette had a mock village built on the outskirts of Paris, where she and friends dressed up as milkmaids (Pinkard 2009: 237). Members of the aristocracy, meanwhile, dined on boiled chicken, poached eggs, and other extremely plain but pricey dishes in the city’s first restaurants, institutions named after the bouillons, known as “restaurants,” that they served (Pinkard 2009: 208; see also Spang 2000).

Chefs’ techniques for highlighting food’s “true taste” more or less survived the years of Revolution. By the early nineteenth century, however, austerity was off the menu. Cookbooks no longer opened with prefaces defending their existence. The value of lavish preparations no longer had to be proven to a public hungry for luxury. But the acceptance of culinary artistry hardly put an end to debates about taste. Instead, the pursuit of legitimacy shifted from the kitchen to the table, from chef to diner. With the rise of gastronomy, the key question became not whether natural taste was worth seeking out and paying dearly for, but rather who could appreciate it, and according to what measures.

Again, gastronomy’s story has been well told, so here I will mention only its main features. As Priscilla Ferguson describes in *Accounting for Taste*, gastronomy took root during a period when the former chefs of nobility sought patronage among the Parisian nouveau riche. They, in turn, sought both status and pleasure in conspicuous consumption, which they found in the city’s increasingly abundant restaurants (up from a hundred or so in the late eighteenth century to more than three thousand by the 1820s) (Ferguson 2004: 86; see also Spary 1999). And they found guidance—in terms of where to go, what to order, which flavors to appreciate, and how to discuss them—in gastronomic texts ranging from Careme’s cookbooks to the *Code Gourmand* to the so-called “Bible” of Epicureanism, Brillat-Savarin’s *Physiology of Taste* (Brillat-Savarin 2000 [1825]).

Brillat-Savarin’s book, as I see it, resembles the Bible in two ways. First, it contains some of the most ubiquitous food clichés of all time; “you are what you eat” being a case in point. But this now-trite phrase did speak to people who saw consumption *in general* as an increasingly important source of identity and social status, and the consumption of fine food in particular

as a virtue, not a vice. Indeed, the nineteenth century's *Encyclopédie Larousse*, unlike Diderot's, distinguished between the glutton's "gastromanie" and the reflective dining of the gastronome, someone who "analyzes, discusses, seeks, pursues the useful and agreeable, the beautiful and the good" (cited in Ferguson 2004: 90–1). Someone who, as the gastronomic journalist Grimod de la Reyniere wrote a few decades earlier, is "more than a creature whom Nature has graced with an excellent stomach ... he also possesses an enlightened sense of taste" (cited in Gigante and Garval 2005: 12).

Brillat-Savarin's book also resembles the Bible in that it contains contradictory answers to the same question, in this case what to make of taste's rise up the hierarchy of the senses. Some see it as evidence of Romanticist "gusto"—that is, an embrace of the animal appetites that Enlightenment thinkers, like their classical predecessors, had found so distasteful (Gigante 2005; Weiss 2002). And in certain places, Brillat-Savarin does claim that what makes humans the "supreme" species on earth is not Reason ("I think therefore I am") but rather our ability and determination to satisfy appetite in ever more pleasurable and sociable ways. We dine, therefore we are.

I use *we* purposely because for Brillat-Savarin this was half the point; his gastronomy celebrated what Simmel later called the "tremendous socializing power" of the meal taken together (Simmel 1994: 346). He believed that the pleasures of the table, while ephemeral, could build lasting bonds. Brillat-Savarin also saw social good on a global scale, in the trade and industry generated by gourmand demand. His was a vision of a "humane community ... founded upon shared appetites, not common ideals" (Brillat-Savarin 2000 [1825]; Shields 2001); except, of course, the ideal that every meal should taste good. In this way, gastronomy redefined taste, our most "primitive" sense, as potentially our most peaceable, civilizing, unifying one.

The real world of gastronomic dining, though, was a pretty exclusive club. And for many of its members, of course, *that* was exactly the point. In *Physiology of Taste*, Brillat-Savarin lists the professions he believed were most inclined to appreciate and advance the arts of the table. His top vote, interestingly, went to bankers, because "anyone who can pile up a great deal of money easily is almost forced, willy-nilly, to be a gourmand" (Brillat-Savarin 2000 [1825]: 163).

Brillat-Savarin also proposed a series of scientific "gastronomic tests" to measure diners' tastefulness. For his part, the journalist Grimod proposed that a jury of professors, or at the least a national code, should determine what foods were objectively best-tasting. Note that these two authors did not always write entirely seriously, except when emphasizing that good taste could not be bought. The fortunate few were born with it; everyone else had to cultivate it. But in reality, the only people able to do this—to dine leisurely

in fine restaurants, to hire chefs to serve fine meals at home—were by and large men with money.<sup>2</sup>

Later generations of gastronomic literature helped to popularize the notion that good cooking and eating were natural French talents, ones that French women had a special responsibility to sustain (Edwards 1997). But gastronomy as a source of unifying national identity drew on measures of good taste that, in retrospect, look as transparently class-bound, patriarchal and altogether elitist as those codified by the eighteenth century's aesthetic philosophers.

Pierre Bourdieu later made this point in his landmark work *Distinction*, in which he used consumer surveys to critique standards of “pure” or “high” taste from Kant onwards (Bourdieu 1984: 486). Such standards, he argued, represented “a fundamental refusal of the facile”; that is, of anything too easy, too obviously pleasurable. Bourdieu's broader point was to show how standards of “high” culture, culinary or otherwise, serve to naturalize, rationalize and reproduce class structure—to make it seem acceptable, in other words, that only the elite few have access to the finer things in life because only they have been educated and brought up to appreciate their fineness. Regardless of how widely Bourdieu's theory of taste applies outside of 1960s France, it is useful at this juncture to pose alongside the ideas of Marx, an obvious influence on Bourdieu, and also those of the fellow socialist, the utopian writer Charles Fourier (Howes 2005).

Interestingly, both Marx and Fourier were rather more optimistic than Bourdieu and other twentieth-century culture critics about the ability of taste to guide us towards the truly good, rather than just to serve the ulterior motive of showing good taste. Marx saw the gratification and refinement of taste, like the other senses, as a fundamental part of our “species-being.” He and Brillat-Savarin would have agreed on this point. So the problem with capitalism was not just that it fostered inequality, and that the rich learned to appreciate *foie gras* while the poor Irishman knew “only the need to eat potatoes, and scabby potatoes at that.” Rather, capitalist morality devalued *everyone's* sensory pleasures in favor of “self-renunciation.” “The less you eat, drink and buy books,” he wrote, “the less you go to the theatre, the dance hall, the public house ... the more you save—the greater becomes your treasure which neither moths nor rust will devour: your capital” (Marx 1959 [1844]).

Marx's ideas about the sensual superiority of socialism drew on those of Fourier, who wrote about a utopian society called “Harmony.” In this society taste, because of its central role in our health and survival, would rank “chief among the five material passions.” Taste would serve as “the magnetic needle of health and of wisdom,” inspiring humans to work towards good eating for all. And the laws of good eating (for even utopia would have its food pyramid!) would be laid down by “gastrosophers”—experts equally

knowledgeable in food hygiene, agriculture and cuisine. The wisest gastrosophers would contribute so much to the quality of utopian life that they would be, Fourier imagined, “promoted to Saintship” in their own lifetimes (Fourier 1851: 29–33).

It’s not hard to see why these visions of well-fed utopian harmony held such appeal in the mid-nineteenth century. It was a time when many Irishmen could not afford even scabby potatoes, French workers were trying to survive yet another revolution, and their peers in England, then the world’s most advanced capitalist nation, endured what might have been the world’s most thoroughly adulterated food supply (Burnett 1966; Collins 1993). That allusion to the “dark satanic mills”? The poet William Blake was referring to the real-life Albion flourmill, a factory despised and eventually torched for driving smaller mills out of business while churning out bad meal. Or so it was rumored.<sup>3</sup> For most of Europe’s non-elite eaters, the Industrial Revolution had yet to bear very tasty fruit. For the poor, in fact, it was probably better to have a dulled and indifferent palate—better than to feel disgust from so much decay, fraud and dietary monotony.

By the end of the century, however, workers’ diets were starting to improve. Initially modest and fragile, these improvements signaled monumental shifts in the global food economy and the nature of capitalism more generally, shifts which would in turn unsettle old notions of taste. Three sets of changes deserve brief mention here. First, late nineteenth-century technological improvements in food production, storage and especially transport helped bring lower prices and greater year-round variety to major city markets across Western Europe and the United States. Working class families could afford more meat, dairy products and fresh produce more often.<sup>4</sup> Second, during this era food power shifted westward, both across the Atlantic and within North America. By “food power” I mean the capacity not just to produce and export in enormous quantities, but also to define the *de facto* technical and commercial standards for what would become global commodities (chilled beef, for example, and later citrus) while also assuring an affordable domestic supply of particularly valued foodstuffs (again, such as beef). Although American food power of this sort hardly threatened French claims to gastronomic supremacy, it did represent a new model of how and what it meant to keep a nation well fed. Third and most broadly, with massive increases in both agricultural and industrial production came the need to seed mass consumer desire, via means both sensory and psychological. *Everyone’s* tastes had to be titillated and habituated, not just the elites’.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, in other words, consumer capitalism took root. And as it did, *freshness* became both an increasingly ubiquitous quality in the modern food supply (in that people began to produce, sell and eat far greater quantities of many perishable

foods) and an increasingly central if ambiguous ideal. What exactly does this mean? The answer to this question needs a bit of background.

I spent several years studying fresh food commerce before it occurred to me that freshness itself might deserve a closer look. Most of my research focused on the contemporary trade in fresh vegetables between two African countries, Burkina Faso and Zambia, and their former colonizers, France and Britain respectively (Freidberg 2004a). Although these airfreight trades date back only a few decades, curiosity led me back to the late 1870s, when the European imperial powers first began importing perishable foods from Africa. Initially I just wanted to know what products came from and went where. But amidst the records of South African beef and Algerian *petit pois*, what stood out were accounts of opposition to the era's brand-new commercial technology: mechanical refrigeration. Farmers and butchers who feared for their own livelihoods counted among the most vocal opponents, but they had company. In 1880, for example, the first Parisian fruit wholesaler to build a cold storage chamber met with so much customer outrage that he had it dismantled.

What were his customers so upset about? Two things. First, they considered it dishonest to sell as "fresh" foods that had actually been preserved by artificial cold. This understanding of freshness was not unusual; in fact, the nearby *Les Halles* market forbid the overnight storage of most perishables (Claflin 2006; Prudhomme 1927). Second, Parisians did not like how this new technology enabled merchants to hoard, speculate, or at the very least avoid bargaining on goods that would otherwise go visibly bad. It gave them a power that seemed dangerous, unfair, even immoral.

The nature of popular opposition of early refrigeration had much in common with contemporary resistance to genetically modified foodstuffs. And even though French engineers coined the term "frigoriphobie," this syndrome was not uniquely French. Chilled meat from the Americas met with suspicion and trade barriers across Western Europe. Britain proved a better market, but also one where prominent figures occasionally announced that refrigerated food might cause cancer or appendicitis. Even in the United States, laws requiring the labeling of all cold-stored foodstuffs passed in several states in the early 1900s, and one cold storage bill reached the US Senate in 1910 (Freidberg 2008). All of which raises an obvious question: what has changed since then? How did a once-feared technology become, in much of the industrialized world, the trusted protector of our fresh food supply?

One short answer is domestication. Refrigeration seemed less menacing once it came in forms small and safe enough for the home kitchen (Anderson 1953; Frost 1993; Watkins 2008). In *Fresh: A Perishable History*, I try to provide a fuller answer. I want to emphasize, though, that this is not a tale of technological determinism or inevitability; it is no script for how we

learned to stop worrying and love the fridge. Rather, it is a story of how the fresh foods inside the fridge came to address concerns beyond the immediate question—faced each time we open the fridge door—of what to eat.<sup>5</sup>

Some of these concerns are ancient, even prehistoric. It makes evolutionary sense to prefer foods at their nutritional peak, and to avoid any hint of dangerous decay. Along these lines you could argue that our tendency to pick out the biggest, brightest, most flawless fruit at the supermarket is in some sense hardwired—though maybe these days maladaptive, in terms of flavor. But this evolutionary explanation only goes so far. It skips over the centuries in which the growing and giving of beautiful fruit came to be considered tasteful, status-building activities, regardless of how the fruit tasted. That history stretches from the classical era to eighteenth-century France to twentieth-century California. There, orange growers put beauty's old value to new use. Mass-marketing campaigns featuring picture-perfect fruit helped convince middle class consumers that they could enjoy this former luxury every day and all year round (Sackman 2005; Stoll 1998).

If the imagery of early Sunkist advertising portrayed fresh fruit as *pretty*, the text tended to emphasize *healthy*. Here again, this meaning of freshness is age-old, but hardly consistent over either time or space. Past generations knew that certain fresh foods could just as easily kill them as cure them. Some, especially in raw form, simply did not satisfy hardworking hungry bodies. Even at the very end of the nineteenth century, mainstream nutritionists prescribed a working class diet centered on cost-efficient, energy-dense fuels, namely wheat and cheap meat. Most fresh fruits and vegetables they dismissed as watery and “frivolous.” The discovery of vitamins in the 'teens eventually changed expert opinion, but again, not in a vacuum. Nutritionally vapid iceberg lettuce could be marketed as a “protective” fresh food in the 1920s only because of what middle class consumers felt they needed food to protect them against—like fat, or the lethargy borne of sedentary office work (Levenstein 2003; Gratzner 2005).

Iceberg lettuce also counted among the fresh foods marketed as a savior from kitchen drudgery. For housewives, this concern was not trivial at a time when social schedules were growing busier and domestic help scarcer (Cowan 1983). But too much convenience—serving up canned soup for supper, say—seemed uncaring. Refrigerators appealed on this front because they helped a housewife care on her own time. She could make meals in advance, keep leftovers looking like new, and even, in the case of the popular Jello salads, turn over the preparation to the fridge itself. For fresh food producers, adding convenience could be profitable but technically tricky; as they trimmed, peeled and packaged, they had to be careful to preserve whatever quality called out “fresh” to consumers. As any supermarket shopper knows, this kind of value-adding is very much ongoing.

More generally, the early twentieth century was an era when freshness in food seemed to offer consumers both proof of their progress—of their forward-looking views, tastes and lifestyles—and an antidote to progress's ill effects. It appealed to an appetite for the new that was also deeply nostalgic.<sup>6</sup> On one hand, menus of the famous New York restaurant Schrafft's boasted about the thousands of "food miles" traveled by its salad fixings—fruits and vegetables brought from the places and seasons in which they grew best. Refrigerator ads showed couples staring transfixed into gleaming Kelvinators. On the other hand, at a time when more and more food on grocers' shelves was obviously processed in an industrial fashion, when health gurus warned of the modern diet's lost vitality, the naked perishability *inside* the fridge appealed to consumers' hunger for the authentic, natural and pure.

As I hope the discussion of taste made clear, such nostalgia was not new. Nor were its consequences without irony. The purity of fresh milk was ultimately assured by cooking it. The pristine naturalness of fresh produce depended on chemical sprays and racialized labor regimes. The authentic fresh-laid egg came from the eternal pseudo-springtime of the electrified henhouse. And so forth. These ironies of the modern fresh food supply coalesced, of course, at a time when fewer and fewer consumers had any direction connection to it. They had no need to know the dirty details, and many did not want to. But they were not entirely cut off from such information; Upton Sinclair, Steinbeck and many lesser-known muckrakers exposed plenty of abuses in fresh food industries.

I mention this to emphasize that consumers were not simply becoming "food illiterate." This is a common but, again, nostalgic explanation for why food these days is not "really fresh" or not whatever else we think "real food" should be (Vileisis 2008). Rather, ways of knowing about food were changing. If early nineteenth-century gourmards looked to gastro-journalists like Grimod for guidance, early twentieth-century American consumers looked—among other places—to advertising. These days it so saturates our popular culture that one easily forgets its early potency. Sunkist's growers were skeptical of advertising's value until their first-ever campaign in the state of Iowa in 1907, when \$6,000 worth of banners reading "Oranges for health, California for wealth" convinced Iowans to immediately up their orange eating by 50 percent.

Thereafter, growers' associations became some of the admen's most loyal clients. But ads weren't just selling citrus. They were selling *buying*—buying as a form of consumption as vital, natural and gratifying as eating or sex. They were selling a vision of the good, full, modern life as one always full of modern new goods, and especially goods that by their very nature needed to be bought again and again and again. In a way, ads were selling freshness even when not advertising fresh foods *per se* (Laird 2001; Lears 1983; Marchand 1985).

Compared with past standards of tastefulness, early twentieth-century freshness was an accessible ideal, especially in the United States. It did not need to be cultivated (though this might be a pleasant backyard hobby); it *could* just be bought. Not by everybody, of course, but certainly by the growing middle class. And the rules for enjoying this ideal were not terribly strict. What the historian Harvey Levenstein called the “revolution of declining expectations” on middle class tables made it perfectly acceptable to toss together meals—sometimes even literally, in the case of the main course salads promoted by California’s iceberg growers (Levenstein 2003).

These days, of course, we like to think know better. We know that many of the products of the decades when freshness became cheap, easy and eventually global do not have much taste, and are not natural nor truly fresh. A new generation of gastro-authorities, some of whom seem to have achieved the saintship that Fourier once imagined, tells us we can still save ourselves if we just follow their “food rules,” to quote the title of American journalist Michael Pollan’s book. These authorities tell us how to navigate the supermarket aisles, or better yet, steer clear of them altogether, so as to avoid buying what Pollan calls “old food from far away” (Pollan 2008: 157; Pollan 2009). They tell us that what is really better for our communities and our planet and us—what is *really* fresher and more tasteful—is the food grown close to home, like it used to be.

During the few months that food actually does grow close to my home, I do buy it. I buy into the sheer pleasantness of the farmers’ market, and the warm feelings I get when the farmers recognize me week after week, year after year. But then, as I ride my bike home, I think about the farmers in Burkina Faso, in West Africa, which was also home for a year, and where I also rode around on a bike. It is one of the world’s poorest countries. Many of the farmers I knew there wanted to send their *haricots verts* far away, to places they themselves would never go. They hungered for globalization simply because their own local markets were quite literally not worth beans (Freidberg 2004b).

And I think about the history that brought those beans from the New World to the Old, and from France to francophone Africa. I think about the history that made those markets so poor, that made those farmers so hungry, that ultimately put them on the wrong side of the twenty-first century world of enlightened eating.

And I wonder: could we food scholars, whatever our field, shake up this world a little? Could we use what we know, or what we might find out, about its bigger, messier and not always savory history, to bring into this world a little more humility, a little more questioning—a little more moral ambiguity? I’ll end with that hope.

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## Notes

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- 1 On philosophers' long-time disdain for physiological taste, see Korsmeyer (1999).
- 2 On the rules and class distinctions of gastronomy, see Ferguson (1998: 605, 613, 618).
- 3 "And did those feet in ancient time" was part of William Blake's preface to "Milton: A Poem" (1808) (Maidment 2001).
- 4 The working class diet was also transformed by the falling prices of non-perishables, as well as by new and more effective food regulations (especially relative to adulteration) and the rise of processed food industries. Classic overviews of these transformations include Burnett (1966) on Britain; Cummings (1941) on the United States, and the latter chapters of Flandrin *et al.* (1999). See also Atkins *et al.* (2007).
- 5 The following material draws from Freidberg (2009).
- 6 This ambivalence towards the modern was hardly limited to food (Lears 1994).

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