

## Editorial

# Not all sweetness and light: new cultural geographies of food

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### Food stories

In the increasingly crowded world of celebrity chefs, Anthony Bourdain has hit upon a winning formula. Whereas Britain's Nigella Lawson and Jamie 'Naked Chef' Oliver have cornered the cooking-as-sexy-and-fun market in cookbooks and TV shows, Bourdain's writing is all about food as death-defying adventure. First came *Kitchen Confidential*, a career memoir that Bourdain admits will leave readers believing 'that all line cooks are wacked-out moral degenerates, dope fiends, refugees, a thuggish assortment of drunks, sneak thieves, sluts and psychopaths'. Then came *A Cook's Tour: The Search for the Perfect Meal*, for which Bourdain, accompanied by a 24/7 camera crew (the tour also appeared on the Food Network), braved landmines in Cambodia, poisonous blowfish in Japan, and vegan potlucks in Berkeley. Barely a year later, as this issue of *Social & Cultural Geography* went to press, Bourdain prepared to release a variation on the same theme, or at least the same name: *A Cook's Tour: Global Adventures in Extreme Cuisines*.

If this latest title intends to tap into the contemporary fascination with extremes and extremism of all kinds, the content of at least

the first *Cook's Tour* appeals to the more enduring appetite for food stories: that is, stories about eating something somewhere that are really stories about the place and the people there. What distinguishes Bourdain's stories from, say, *A Year in Provence* or the film *Chocolat* (southern France figures prominently in this genre), is that he not only travels across many borders but also into places where cuisine and the rest of life are not such neat metaphors for one another. In one chapter, Bourdain's visit to the hometown of the cooks in his 'French' restaurant takes him to (surprise!) Puebla, Mexico; in another, the quest for culinary perfection in Saigon seems suddenly obscene and meaningless after an encounter with a Vietnamese land mine victim.

All the articles in this section are concerned with the not-so-neat kind of food stories. They are particularly interested in the relationships and contrasts between particular foods' unrecorded 'social lives' (Appadurai 1986)—that is, the empirical conditions and relations of production, distribution and consumption—and the narratives told about them. Some such narratives are explicitly produced for public consumption, in the form of advertising or other forms of publicity (as we see in Domosh's 'Pickles and Purity' and Hollander's 'Re-

naturalizing Sugar’); others are collectively woven out of the food’s association with particular places, social groups and politics (as Guthman shows in ‘Fast Food/Organic Food’).

The different narratives, of course, are almost always intertwined. Especially in the advertising-saturated countries of the global North, most food is sold with a story. As Hollander’s article shows, even plain white sugar comes literally wrapped up in narratives celebrating, among other things, its plainness and whiteness. But the public does not just read food meanings off the side of a cereal box. Other sources of information and experience threaten the manufactured narratives, and demand response. Sugar advertising, again, seeks to counter sugar’s unhealthy image, just as the British supermarkets’ ‘ethical trade’ codes, discussed in ‘Cleaning Up Down South’, attempt to respond to popular media portrayals of exploitation in their African supply regions. Whatever their relationships to one another, all such narratives about specific food commodities provide insights into the broader meanings attached, under particular political, economic and social conditions, to food and eating more generally. In other words, the reading of a food’s story reveals, like any good biography or travelogue, a much bigger story—a cultural geography—of particular times and places.

### Food geographies

The following articles all undertake close readings of food stories in order to approach four otherwise quite different subjects. This common approach provides one reason for titling the section *new* cultural geographies of food, but it is one that acknowledges and builds on two older generations of geographers’ (and others’) work in the field of food culture,

broadly understood. The first generation, in keeping with the approaches of cultural geography and cultural ecology prior to the mid-1980s, treated food and foodways as products of particular places—cooked up, as it were, in particular ‘culture hearths’, and diffused along the paths of explorers, migrants and merchants. Although some of the assumptions of this work have since been thoroughly critiqued, it had at least two strengths. It paid careful empirical attention to the ecological and technical conditions of food production, and it appreciated the contingency of food’s historical geographies, by recognizing that it only takes a few seeds or a handful of immigrant chefs to transform a particular locale’s agriculture and food culture. Hollander’s and Guthman’s articles pay dues to the first tradition, focusing respectively on Florida and the San Francisco Bay Area, while Domosh’s and my own pieces consider the commercial and colonial histories behind particular transnational food circuits.

A second and still productive generation of work emerged from economic geography’s embrace of consumption and consumer culture more generally. Dating from the early 1990s, this interest in consumption reflected not just broader theoretical trends in critical political economy (i.e. the influences of feminism and post-structuralism) but also a recognition that the consumer had become a more influential, or at least more vocal, economic and political force than ever before, not only but especially in the realm of food (Bell and Valentine 1997). For cultural geography, the challenge then became to understand the cultural contexts and consequences (normative, practical and spatial) of ‘consumer power’.

Thus attention shifted away from culture’s role in the human manipulation of the natural environment of food production, and focused instead on the relationship between food consumption culture and socially constructed

ideals of bodily nature—a relationship which, as Hollander's and Guthman's articles show, has become increasingly fraught, especially in the USA, with conflicting messages and desires. This work also considered the gendered, racialized and class meanings attached to particular spaces of food consumption, such as homes, shops and restaurants (which Guthman's article, again, considers). Supermarkets have received particular attention in UK-based research, not just as places where people buy and attach meanings to food but also firms that profit, as discussed in 'Cleaning Up Down South', from their role as protectors of 'consuming interests' (Marsden, Flynn and Harrison 2000).

By now it should be clear that cultural geographies of food have, for some time, tended to include a healthy dose of critical political economy. The articles in this issue are no exception. If anything, political economy has forced us to re-evaluate certain assumptions about the nature and extent of consumer agency, both past and present, in light of the formidable resources mobilized to shape taste and sell food. Corporate manufacturers like Heinz and Flo-Sun Sugar have historically played highly visible roles in this game, cultivating demand for value-added, flavour- and calorie-adding processed foods, i.e. ketchup and sugar. But as Guthman's and my own articles show, the growing markets for salad mix and baby vegetables (products consumed precisely for their lack of substance) cannot be understood without reference to the corporate capital financing their production and packaging. While we would hardly claim that taste is a corporate conspiracy, we do want to emphasize that, as both a physical practice and sensation and as a social statement, taste has histories—local, national and imperial—worthy of closer attention from geographers.

At the same time, we seek to pull food production, as a biophysical and social process, back into the geographic study of food culture in its different forms and scales. We are particularly interested in the organizational cultures that shape relations of production, exchange, contract and investment in different sites and commodity networks. These organizational cultures have not simply emerged within and between particular societies, meaning, for example, that the corporate paternalism on southern African vegetable farms takes a different form than the Heinz factory version. They are also part of the stories narrated *back* to those societies, in various ways but always selectively. The 'environmentally friendly' processes associated with organic farming say nothing about the highly unfriendly labour practices prevailing on many organic farms; supermarket ethical trade narratives obscure the global and local inequities that allow 'ethical' standards to be imposed on those who can least afford them; Florida sugar industry PR makes age-old production methods seem like attributes of a new, improved sugar.

We also consider how the processes and sites of food production, like those of food consumption, express and seek to inculcate cultural norms both in and beyond the workplace. At its most imperially ambitious, the labour of food production not only demonstrates but cultivates *civilization*. Henry Heinz certainly aspired to this goal in his clean, homey factories; as do the managers of Zambia's hyper-hygienic vegetable plantations. In both cases, ideologies of gender, race and class pervade the messages about how civilized people work and consume. The Slow Food movement, meanwhile, encourages careful, 'reflexive', spare-no-expense food production both on the farm and in the kitchen—a social and political ideal that, as Guthman observes, has now become a statement of elite class status.

### Bon appetit?

As new cultural geographies of food, these articles aim to bring critical, yet integrative perspectives to agro-food studies, a field where analyses of the nature, culture and political economy of food still rarely take place on the same page. But we also want to show how food stories have much to contribute to the larger projects of cultural geography. In the interests of space, I mention here only two.

First, we look to food stories for insights into the *anxieties* generated by different kinds of social-spatial and social-natural change. Anthropologists and sociologists have long observed how simply eating is inherently a source of anxiety, because of its potential to cause discomfort, sickness, and social or ethical offence (Fischler 1993). But here we examine the moral discourses, social practices and political-legal controversies which have arisen around different food industries and trades in order to understand the broader anxieties generated by, for example, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century versions of globalization, evidence of environmental degradation, and changing ideals of body image.

Second, through the study of food stories—what they say and do not say, and how they are received—we see how culture travels. And we see in these cases that it does not travel light or lightly. The subjects of these articles are not the staple food and feed crops on which national populations and agricultural economies survive or languish; on the contrary, they are what Sidney Mintz calls ‘fringe’ foods: tasty, enjoyable but not too substantial (Mintz 1994). Nonetheless—and here I am reiterating for emphasis my earlier invocation of political

economy—their production and distribution has historically been inextricable from systems of domination and exploitation, whether local and interpersonal, regional and ecological, or transnational and imperial. Not even organic salad mix escapes the dynamics that have produced a fast food nation and (increasingly) world; not even the most pristine farms and factories are free of the taint of racism and anti-unionism.

In a world where food has become the flash point of many different struggles in defence of particular cultural norms as well as cultural sovereignty more generally, the most powerful purveyors of food have been quick to dish up alternatives. From certain privileged vantage points it can easily appear as if everyone, not just the globe-trotting superchef Anthony Bourdain, can find the ‘perfect meal’ without venturing farther than the supermarket; it can appear as if the ‘check-out counter revolution’ is nearly won. Cultural geography’s critical perspective can provide a healthy antidote to the all-too-Happy Meal.

### References

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