



Why We Eat What We Eat: How Columbus Changed the Way the World Eats

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Why We Eat What We Eat: How Columbus Changed the Way the World Eats Raymond Sokolov of the Americas set in motion a transformation of food cultures around the world, this look at the five-hundred-year revolution in food history explains how Europeans, Americans, and Asians came to eat what they eat today.

Why We Eat What We Eat: How Columbus Changed the Way the World Eats Details

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Debbie says

Often quite speculative, this book was still richly informational. It was fun to read about a foodie's inspirations and investigations. I've looked at olives, corn, potatoes and newer (to me) foods in a new light. What could be more fun than food?!!

Linus Williams says

The book starts off great--exploring the cuisines of the new and the old worlds around the time of spanish colonization, and how native cuisine influenced/adapted/survived colonization and influenced old-world cuisine. Near the middle, though, the book breaks apart into a collection of semi-related essays , unconnected to the initial premise. Not that they're bad reading, but it just feels like these pieces were written for a magazine and shoehorned in

Yenny says

Dapet di toko buku bekas juga, harganya cuma 10 rb perak. Oh no! hahahaha... Tertarik ngeliat judulnya en pengen aja membaca sesuatu yang lain. Dan ternyata isinya gak mengecewakan, ternyata makanan pun punya banyak mata rantai..

Chelsea says

A great, if somewhat verbose, look at how food cross borders and influences culture. Sokolov at one point wonders if the potato famine in Ireland hadn't occurred, the course of history in America might have looked quite different.

Anne says

I would have given it 5 stars, except for the irritating tic of praising/exculpating Columbus every couple of chapters, as an intro to assessing the impact of his voyage (and the others it is standing in for) on what we eat. This is a book about how eating habits, and food sources, changed after the Columbian "exchange," which is to say, after new world and old world exchanged and fused grains, vegetables, animals, roots, and other edible matters ("exchange" is a euphemism also for slavery, disease, etc...). NS is most interested in Afro-Caribbean cuisines and foods, and is most rooted in NYC (he was a longtime reporter/editor for the Wall Street Journal, and wrote a monthly column on food for Natural History for years) such as Puerto Rico, Cartagena, Colombia, Bahia and the Philippines (the biggest 'Asian' entry in the bunch). He is pretty consistently interested in the directly Columbian/Spanish colonial legacy and the indigenous foods and

cooking that mingle with it. Tho he has chapters on peppers, pumpkins and other specific foods, his main aim is to set this "revolution" on par with the nouvelle cuisine revolution of the 1970s, and even to dwarf that latter one.

I had just been thinking that it was a very early example of deconstructive writing, and a surprisingly popular/populist one, and he actually comes right out and says it. He even has a trip to talk to Claude Levi-Strauss and argues that his glimpse of L-S's archive of index cards showed the remoteness & limits of Structuralism, a philosophy (""") that saw patterns (esp in "raw" places and societies) that were rule-bound in their shaping of culture, and incapable of change. NS's tack is to instead show change (w/o necessarily analysing it in terms of political economy), and draw attention to the many subsequent lives of post-"exchange" fusions of the last 500+ years.

Angela Bessah says

Not only do you learn about foods....but a lot about history as well.

Elizabeth says

Interesting amalgamation of select food related history.

The books consists of an introduction explaining the author's main thesis - that what we eat changed drastically after Columbus discovered the Americas - and then devolves into chapters focused on important food locales (mostly countries) followed by chapters focusing on specific foods relevant to his main argument. The introductory material was rather strong, but the remaining chapters were not all of equal merit and caused the book to feel disjointed and sometimes redundant. For example, the chapter on tomatoes I found fascinating while the chapter on strawberries provided little of interest.

However, for a book published in 1991, many of the points Sokolov makes are still extremely relevant, the chapter on Puerto Rico being particularly insightful in light of current events. I would recommend this book for history buffs, but also those involved in the business of food (chefs and the like). Sokolov's views on "authentic" cuisine are perhaps the most meaningful highlight of this gastronomic world tour.

Leslie says

Mouth-puckeringly dry humour... "Columbus may have been history's best example of someone who did great things without knowing what they were." Succinct and acerbic observations about the movement of food across nations, carried by explorers, and how the French tried to take credit for everything. A must-read if you love food and want to know the provenance and politics of what's on your plate.

Martin Earl says

The central thesis of this book is fascinating, though ultimately kind of obvious: the encounter between the

Old World and the New changed the way that every person on earth eats. Before Columbus, there were no tomatoes in Italian food, no chilies in Thai or Chinese food, no potatoes anywhere in Europe at all. Likewise, there were no pork or cheese in Mexican cuisine.

Beyond pointing these things out, though, Sokolov gives micro-histories of both regions and dishes. This is a difficult task because of the depth of the changes that occurred. Can a complete or, even thorough, account be given of the food-ways of Puerto Rico, given its status as colony that was also a central hub of trade between Spain and the Americas and even Asia? Hardly. That is a book unto itself. So also with most of the topics that must be covered in a book on this subject. Potatoes have a chapter, as do tomatoes and several tubers, and all of these chapters are full of interesting information (mostly). But none of them answer *all* the questions I have about the history of that item. (That's not true. I had almost no questions about manioc.) A book about tomatoes, a book about potatoes, a book about apples...these would be more thorough. However, I understand that Sokolov didn't set out to write all those books, that he wanted a survey of the main topics. In this regard he does a good job.

Of course there are some elements of style with which I could quibble. Sokolov is a journalist/columnist/writer of articles, and the style with which he writes is sometimes more wending than direct and the narrative structure of some chapters sometimes gets a little lost (again, a hazard of the topic). While at other times, it is obvious he is very excited about what he has learned and wants to share, for instance, every known dish that was recorded as being eaten in (Mexico?) by the conquistadors, including both the original native and Spanish interpretive names. And though his in-text citations are great, I would nonetheless have appreciated a bibliography.

So, I know this doesn't sound like a 4-star review, and sort of nit-picky. But it was a very good book, but suffered from problems of programming. Its key failing was incompleteness, a fault that, if remedies, would make this book more than a thousand pages long.

Finally, among the best parts of this book was the extended discussion on authenticity. In food culture now, authenticity is often seen as the greatest good, though "authenticity" is a tenuous claim or to make or defend. What is an authentic apple pie? The one your mother made? Your grandmother? Do you make it the same as your cousin? Do you make it the same every time? How can we convey a cultural idea from one group to another when the second has no understanding of the first?

In fact, how do we define authenticity within a culture? Almost all the dishes eaten anywhere were all invented in the past 400 years, and most of them far more recently than that. They *seem* ancient and unchanging to use, but are in fact in a constant state of flux. All cuisines of the world are constantly encountering others and sharing with them, including our own personal cuisines. If that is the case, then what is authentic? What is a hybrid and what is a bastardization? This, ultimately, was the great thought-experiment of this book, rather than the main thesis. How do we create and maintain, and can we label and preserve a certain authenticity? What are the implications of that stance? Indeed, a more fluid understanding is ultimately best for all.

Margaret Sankey says

One of the classics of food history, Sokolov traces the Columbian Exchange through food products and their wide ranging effects--chilies from South America to India via Portugal, corn in Europe with the major downside of pellagra, potatoes, cows and horses on the plains of North America, quinine from cinchona

bark, Moorish Spanish food crossed with tropical resources in the Philippines and the long saga of tomatoes.

John says

The title was intriguing (arousing the curiosity or interest of).

On page 237 of my 1991 edition, the book is intended not "For most people in the world this is of no direct importance, but to food-mad novelty seekers in the industrial nations" is the presumed intended audience for the book, and thus a motivation for the style of presentation (and hence the style of this review).

There is a fair bit of useful information, though most of it is concentrated in the later pages, where it became (for me) easier to read more than a few pages at a time, wading through the diversions, as though being conversationally entertained with asides, while the word cook piques (stimulates (interest or curiosity)) the appetite, presents the "meat" of the subject, wraps up with indirect references to explain his drawn out (in "other" words, for stimulating contrast) creation, wrapping up the discourse to a satisfying sense of repast, just before adjourning to the final period of this tract.

The author is a professional writer establishing his knowledge, credentials, and highly researched authority on the subject of food and food history and philosophy, with prolific obscure references both ancient and modern, and prose that is well peppered at close-spaced intervals with highbrow vocabulary, and a modicum of lowbrow verbiage tossed in to show that he can cover the bases, while residing at, if not heading, the table of elite food aficionados and back-up food-o-files.

Rosey says

I wish the author had stuck more closely to his stated purpose in writing this book. The book seemed to devolve into a random jumble.

Katie says

Interesting. I'm glad I read this selection of food ethnography, but damned if it isn't an odd little book. Based on the title I thought it would be a tracing of commonplace American menus back through history; instead, it opens with chapters on a number of different Spanish countries and their culinary traditions. Okay, I thought, perhaps it's an examination of how Spanish-speaking countries' commonplace culinary habits were formed by los conquistadores - but no, then we start to veer to non-Spanish countries, even back to the Old World. All right then - it must be about how this particular exploratory era was a pivotal point in food history - nope! We veer abruptly back to modern times. Then the chapters change from focusing on a single country to focusing on a single food - many of which were already treated in the country chapters, as with Peru and

potatoes. Along with his habit of name-dropping, the author's organizational skills are not quite my style.

But woven into this labyrinthine book (which felt much lengthier/information-rich than it looked) was a wealth of fascinating information and tidbits about all sorts of foods and places and times. The title is misleading: in many places, Sokolov focuses on why we DON'T eat what we don't eat, but these stories are just as fascinating if not more so (fruit too easily bruised to travel well; whims of geography, politics and economics; class-based food preferences; and so on.)

Reading a food narrative written twenty years ago is a fascinating window into the mindset of the late 1980s and early 90s: the author feels no need to condemn the largely meat-and-starch-based Puerto Rican diet the way I imagine a more contemporary author would, for example. Instead, he focuses his attention on examining why Puerto Rican food has not taken off as a cultural phenomenon in the way virtually-identical other Caribbean diets have. Really interesting and a valid question, which might be obscured by shrugging one's shoulders and assuming it's because it's not the healthiest diet for a Westerner.

I've come across a lot more critical than I intend to be, considering how much I enjoyed the historical gems uncovered here. I've glad I read this book and I would leaf through it again periodically. I also now want to try Peruvian food, mulberries, cherimoyas, and Utah scones. This is the danger of food writing... a danger which is very sweet.

Jennifer says

Never again will I question the authenticity of food. The author explains how dramatically the world's cuisine changed in just 50 years after Columbus came to the New World. The world is an every-evolving place, even before global warming, airplanes, and the Internet.

Charles Lemos says

A quick and very enjoyable read on global food patterns and how they came to be is *Why We Eat What We Eat: How the Encounter Between the New World and the Old Changed the Way Everyone on the Planet Eats* (published 1991) written by Raymond Sokolov, the former Travel and Culture writer for the Wall Street Journal. This is an easy, accessible entry point for those interested in food history as opposed to the more academic volume by historian Alfred Crosby entitled *The Columbian Exchange*, written in 1972.

The first part of the book covers six global hotspots of culinary melting pots where food worlds collided to create a new cuisine: Mexico, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Cartagena in Colombia, Bahia in Brazil, and Peru. Sokolov doesn't pretend that this is an exclusive list but rather is making the case in these cases the cuisine today is truly a coming together of different food traditions despite the underlying clash of civilizations.

The second part of the book is brief but follows a bibliographical overview of the development of two of the world's best known and most distinct food cultures, that of France and China. And the last part of the book looks at how certain fruits and vegetables spread around the world. There are few mistakes here and there such as suggesting the potato chip was invented in Saratoga Springs. The story is true but thinly fried potatoes were certainly eaten prior to a frazzled chef sending back a plate of fries to disgruntled diner who

had complained that his fries were too thick.

Sokolov is a great writer, that alone should make you want to read this book. At numerous points, his wit and clever use of word actually had me laughing out loud on public transportation even.
