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Ordered Eating: Food and Social Structures

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Ordered Eating: Food and Social Structures

Paul S. Lloyd. *Food and Identity in England, 1540-1640: Eating to Impress*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2015. 245 pages, \$112.00, ISBN 978-1-4725-1443-1.

Massimo Montanari. *Medieval Tastes: Food Cooking, and the Table*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. 267 pages, \$35.00, ISBN 978-0-231-16786-4.

In the last few decades, food history has gone from being an unusual side-study viewed as outside the realm of academic history proper to one of the most popular sub-fields of social, economic, and cultural history – if not a field in its own right. Pre-modern historians have welcomed this development as one that expands our limited sources by opening new ones to us and providing us another method for reexamining old ones. At the same time, however, our dearth of evidence means that all and every sort of source material must be used in our study. And, of course, food history itself is a broad concept that can encompass history of cuisine, history of diet, a subfield of economic history, and much more. Thus, food history can be simultaneously a brilliant, insightful use of intellectual acuity to make scant sources speak, revealing precious details of pre-modern daily life and have a tendency toward disorganization. *Food and Identity in England, 1540-1640: Eating to Impress*, by Paul S. Lloyd, and *Medieval Tastes: Food, Cooking, and the Table*, by Massimo Montanari, both exhibit these dual tendencies. Both make insightful contributions to pre-modern social and cultural history, demonstrating the way in which food shapes and is shaped by social class. But both also provide cautionary tales of the pitfalls of the unwary food historian and serve as examples of changes in the modern publishing world.

Paul S. Lloyd, who works at the University of Leicester, has written numerous articles on food in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England, and his new book continues these investigations. The overall argument of the book in Lloyd's own words is that during the Tudor and Early Stuart period “dramatic social polarization, and attitudes relating to ‘class’ and identity, was reflected in the changing symbolic meaning of food and food consumption practices” and that while the consumption practices of the upper-classes changed significantly, “the foods deemed fit for manual workers...hardly changed at all” (xi). Lloyd prefaces his argument with an introduction covering previous literature, methodology, sources, and the social make-up of sixteenth and seventeenth-century England. Chapter 1, Food and Identity, in many ways continues the introduction. It places the discussion within a context of moral condemnation of luxury that existed alongside the importance of luxury food in shaping and asserting social position. The next three chapters then discuss diet by class: the “meaner sort”, the “middling sort”, and the gentry and nobility (whom Lloyd convincingly argues shared the same dietary habits). The last section of the book looks more closely at particular issues; it addresses “Special Foods” (essentially the highly status-laden foods of the upper class), food gifts, and special occasions.

Lloyd's facility with the sources shines through in the central chapters. Though he relies heavily on household accounts, he also makes good use of letters, dietary advice, moral treatises and sermons, cookbooks, and court records. Lloyd uses these cleverly to show us what people ate by class. For example, as he notes, the lower classes did not leave us an account of what they ate, so we must read between the lines to get a glimpse of their diet. Two classes of the laboring poor for whom we can do this are foot-soldiers and servants. Lloyd looks at the dietary recommendations for foot soldiers, then considers how their pay related to these foods. Again, to determine the diet of servants, he looks at inexpensive items in household accounts that were bought in large quantities, as well as the foodstuffs purchased when the family was known to be away from home. However, the diet of the laboring classes seems to have little impact on the argument, other than as a point of contrast to the "middling sorts" and the elite. In fact, Lloyd's argument is not about their diet, but about what the upper-classes thought their diet *should* be and how they contrasted this to their own. In the end, Lloyd does show that the upper-classes used food to shape and reflect their status. He shows this by noting what foods were purchased for the family alone, what foods the "middling sorts" considered appropriate to festive occasions that the elite ate regularly, what foodstuffs were deemed worthy of gift-giving and used to celebrate special occasions, and how these dishes related to those promoted in class-conscious cookery books. He notes that foods deemed fashionable changed over the period. Lloyd further notes that the upper classes called these foods "necessary" in part to avoid the accusation of "luxury", and in part, because they were truly necessary in order to mark social position.

Unfortunately, the argument is neither as strong nor as clear as it might be. The book's organization is such that discussions that naturally connect are separated by dozens of pages. Lloyd seems to recognize this himself to some degree, as he frequently says "as will be discussed below" or refers the reader to another chapter. This frequently leads to ineffective abstractions being used in arguments and the proof being offered at a later stage. This is especially true of the first chapter, which really could be omitted or shortened and combined with the introduction. Further, the purpose in setting the last two chapters apart was not entirely clear. Discussion of status-laden dishes, for example, and changes in their consumption works well to support the argument about elite use of food as a social marker. Again, the discussion of mock versions of foods seems more appropriate if discussed in the context of the middling sort. Here, there is another problem. Throughout the discussion of mock versions of prestige foods (primarily meat), which appear in cookbooks of the time, Lloyd speculates that the middling sorts might well have turned to these to provide themselves a sense of status, and he makes some good observations about what these dishes mean. However, he never fully connects the dots – in part because the discussion is so far removed from his analysis of middling sorts' diets – but in the end claims to have proven that these dishes show a desire for social betterment (179). This discussion would be much stronger were it centered on the burgeoning cookery book market, the marketing of these books to the middling sort, and the middle sorts ownership of them. This tendency to take for granted without proving appears elsewhere.

Lloyd claims that the lower classes frequently had second jobs and other means of income or access to food that made their diets more diverse than we expect. He supports this claim with reference to scholarship on the topic. As background to another argument, this is fine,

but later he claims that he has shown that the lower-class diet was more diverse than meets the eye without every demonstrating it. If this contention is a major part of the argument regarding the lower class, then it needs to be substantiated with further evidence. Again, after noting “foods that were highly regarded by the nobility and gentry were seldom targeted by thieves” at least not in several counties he studies (114), he then argues that theft of luxury foods expanded the diet of the poor. He cites the case of Richard Slattery who was charged with stealing spices; though he admits that he likely tried to sell them on the black market, Lloyd then says, “Those of lower status had a sense of luxury that grew partly from being exposed to high-society trends through contact with others. This exposure could spark curiosity and a desire for imitative consumption resulting in a discerning taste for the exotic” (128). This seems an overreaching claim to make on the basis of one theft. Moreover, his own evidence would suggest that such thefts, as he acknowledges, were more likely intended for resale than personal consumption. Such behavior would be further supported by his discussion of “gifts” between the gentry and the poor. For example, he describes how the Reynells were gifted a number of partridges, for which they gave a return gift of 3s. He notes that this sum “enough to pay for twelve chickens – may have been more useful than partridges” to the gifter (144). Such evidence would suggest the poor were more likely to sell luxury foods than to sample them. It is, however, true that such thefts and gifts meant that the poor had the *opportunity* to eat luxury foods if they chose; to me what is far more intriguing is the possibility that despite these opportunities the lower orders had so fully internalized hierarchical values surrounding food that they preferred to sell them to those for whom they were appropriate – granted one must also acknowledge economic necessity. In other places, the evidence is simply a stretch, such as the use of a poem about a poor wanderer eating off the land to argue that flowers were food for the poor transformed into food for the rich by preparation and context (111).

Part of the problem seems to stem from a desire to marshal all the possible evidence. As noted above, this is one of Lloyd’s great strengths – using a wide variety of sources effectively. At the same time, however, it leads to stretches of the evidence such as those mentioned above or tangents. For example, we are told that conviviality could lead to hostility as well as friendship, and he cites the case of the Chomley and Hobys (149), but other than stating that their feud began at a dinner, he provides no further detail. It is indeed interesting that the feud began after an exchange of hospitality, but without more detail the case does not work to support an argument about shared meals as a moment of exclusion. Again, Lloyd argues that middling sorts saw the potential for luxury foods to raise their social status – and indeed, I believe they did – but one example he provides is that of John Johnson’s bankruptcy. Again, he never gives any detail about the financial problems, let alone links them to the purchase of luxury food. Here, though, part of the problem is again organization, as Lloyd does discuss Johnson’s luxurious diet, but without emphasizing how excessive it was to his means nor in close proximity to the bankruptcy (73). In other places, however, Lloyd oddly omits discussions that seem highly relevant. For example, though he shows with one of his many useful tables, that sugar’s price had dropped substantially from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century, he writes not a word about the connection to colonialism. Perhaps he takes this for granted, which might be understandable. Less defensible is that he takes it for granted that his readers are familiar with the people and places he discusses. After discussing Thomas Howard’s proposed diet for the troops, he suddenly

refers to the Duke of Norfolk. For those who do not study early-modern England, the fact that these are one and the same person takes a moment to register. Throughout the book, Lloyd refers to his noble characters by name, title, and estate interchangeably, making it tough to keep track of everyone and follow the argument. A better arrangement might be to discuss each character in turn or to provide a reference in an appendix.

Part of this organizational problem likely stems from the lack of good editorial support. The book is plagued by another problem for which I am loath to blame Lloyd: numerous, sometimes mildly humorous but always annoying, typos. Surely this is a strong argument for the return of the professional copy editor?

These problems aside, Lloyd's work still does contribute to the scholarship on food and society in pre-modern Europe. In fact, some of his more tangential observations, such as the consumption of meat during Lent across religious lines, are quite interesting and deserve greater emphasis. Though reading the entire text with its organizational and other problems is less pleasant than it might be, the book contains a wealth of information that should be of use and interest to other scholars of the subject. I would advise those interested to concentrate on chapters 3-6, to read sections of interest independently (and jump ahead when told "see x below"), and to make use of the many charts and graphs.

Massimo Montanari, Professor of Medieval History at the University of Bologna, has authored or co-authored over a dozen books and numerous articles. The current book, *Medieval Tastes: Food, Cooking, and the Table* is a collection of essays written by Montanari over the last decade or so. The eighteen chapters range in length and cover a wide variety of topics from modern conceptions of medieval food to chestnuts to the introduction of the fork. As such, they are best read discretely, but taken together they do complement one another. Though Montanari himself, in the introduction, links them together merely on their discussion of medieval food, social status and food's role in defining it is a major theme throughout the book.

Two examples of Montanari's exploration of food and class come in chapters eight and eighteen. Chapter eighteen focuses on the relationship between taste and knowledge, a relationship made more intriguing in Italian because of the closeness of the two words (*sapere/sapore*). Montanari begins by explaining the science of taste; that is, that while certain biological responses occur in response to certain flavors on the tongue, our conception of them as good or bad is largely culturally constructed. Medieval people, however, saw taste as extremely powerful, even dangerous. Like all the senses it could lead to temptation, but because it required direct contact with the object of desire, it was worse than sight or hearing. To taste something was to know its essence. Montanari then explains how this connects to medieval dietetic advice, linked tastiness to healthiness, and what was healthful for a particular person. Thus, having good taste, desiring those foods deemed higher-class, was seen as biological. The upper-classes then could argue that the lower-classes would not enjoy refined food, not having a taste for it. This "taste" then became a marker of class, and as such, it could be taught and learned. This allowed, as Montanari says "the development and affirmation of bourgeois culture" (210). This discussion of taste is a prime example of Montanari's ability to mix modern science, theory, and medieval texts in order to come to persuasive and interesting conclusions. Another example occurs in his

discussion of cheese. He begins by discussing the suspicion toward dairy products on both cultural and medical grounds that prevailed in Antiquity and the Middle Ages. In medieval Europe, cheese became associated with the peasantry, for whom it comprised a large portion of the diet. As a non-luxury, it became a replacement for meat in the monastic diet, which simultaneously affirmed its lowly status and raised it to the level of something worthy of attention. Over time, this monastic association combined with the receipt of rent in the form of cheese, brought it to the tables of the nobility. Here, then, we see popular food becoming elite food over time and through changing of context. This is not unlike Lloyd's observation about the changing status of offal in early-modern England. Montanari makes a similar observation about butter, in one of the best essays in the book. Noting the interplay of class, geography, and religion, he describes butter's shift from a lowly peasant food to a central element in *haute cuisine*. As he argues, there is no clear economic impetus for this change, but rather one of "'volition' and carrying in its wake important economic changes" (97).

As a rule, the essays are wide-range, exploring a specific food or social trend, rather than narrowly focused on a given set of documents or people. While this makes the work an interesting read, it also allows for some potential problems. At times, the essays can seem basic, almost encyclopedic, adding little to what is already well accepted by food historians. At others, the theoretical approaches can become unmoored, leaving the reader in a world of abstraction. For example, chapter three, *The Grammar of Food*, is inarguably intriguing, and its overall point – that food functions as a language – is convincing. Nevertheless, Montanari seems to become so caught up in the metaphor that he forces his ideas and evidence to fit it. For example, when he says that fats “confer on foods a spatial/temporal connotation of adverbs” his point is good, but the metaphor begins to seem forced. However, much of the awkwardness of this essay in particular likely stems from issues of translation. Near the beginning of the essay he explains, “The resources of the uneducated had a particular appeal to the aristocracy, which enjoyed the forest as the site of the hunt” (26). I found myself confused, as the uneducated (peasants I supposed) did not hunt, nor, too my knowledge, did the aristocracy find their foodways particularly appealing. As I read further, my confusion only grew, as I encountered the idea that monks “opted instead for peasant culture” (27) followed by a discussion of animal husbandry. If the peasants are contrasted with the uneducated, who might these uneducated be? And then it struck me that “ineducato” was likely the source of the problem and that the word would be much better translated as “uncivilized.” Though this is the only truly problematic translation error, there are other oddities of translation that are jarring to the reader of English. While we might accept “Guillaume de Conches” (124), “Guillaume de Rubruk” (195), or again even Giovanni Cassiano (201), English-speaking medievalists will be a bit put off by “Pier Damiani” (144), discussions of saint “Colombano” (119) or Charlemagne's biographer called “Eginardo” (183). Here, the translator, whose text is generally quite readable, should not be blamed too harshly. Once again, a professional copy editor, familiar with the field, would have been able to correct for standard English usage.

One final concern is worth noting. Montanari discusses a wide range of intriguing ideas, but without sufficient notes. For example, I found myself eager to explore the Tuscan cookbook mentioned in chapter two, but upon turning to the relevant endnote, I was redirected to Bruno

Lauriou's masterful *Le Regne de Taillevent*, rather than an edition or library location. Similar instances abound throughout the book; instances of basic summary well-known in the field vacillated with intriguing claims that were never substantiated. These things taken together made me wonder who the intended audience was. The material was too specific for a general audience, but too general and lacking in notes for scholars.

Nevertheless, Montanari's new book is well worth a read and, at such a reasonable price, belongs on the bookshelf of any medieval food historian. I myself plan to use it as a starting place for basic information, as well as a model of novel and convincing ways to approach the history of food. I also believe the work could be useful in a graduate or upper-level undergraduate seminar on food history for the same reasons. The essays vary enough to provide students with a broad range of sources, methods, and theories, even though written by a single scholar.