Review of:

**Three World Cuisines. Italian, Mexican, Chinese.**


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In an era of globalisation, the opening statements offer the promise of understanding how the cuisines developed over time, their internal structure and logic, and how they influenced the way we eat today (2). Albala makes it clear, however, that the book does not aim to compete with specialised historical studies or cookbooks for any of these three food traditions. Rather, “the goal is to analyze the building blocks that make up a cuisine.” These building blocks include “the material ingredients and technologies as well as attitudes and historical forces that have shaped taste preferences” (2). Not everyone will agree with Albala’s view that these three cuisines “are the oldest on the planet, with the longest span of evolution, and arguably...”
Albala begins with an introduction to what he terms "a theory of gastronomy." The theory takes in a definition of world cuisines as those which "have had a broad historical influence on foodways across the globe" (4), touches on the question of "food ideology" as "a set of beliefs specifically about eating that are motivated by political, religious, or social forces, which specifically intend to affect change" (7), and offers a view of authenticity which is reflected throughout the book. Arguing that "authenticity points to an imaginary tradition frozen in time and place that exists only as a point of contrast with more familiar and presumably corrupt permutations" (11), Albala equates authenticity with prescriptivism and ultimately rejects the word "authentic" on the grounds that it is "vague, capricious, and ultimately misleading in a book on the evolution of the culinary arts" (13). The book is structured as a textbook: each chapter starts with a set of "learning objectives," proceeds to a discussion of the main topic, and concludes with a set of study or review questions, followed by recipes from each of the three cuisines. A short glossary and a brief bibliography conclude the work.

Within this framework, the main chapters proceed from general topics, such as a historical overview of the three cuisines (Chapter 1) and an overview of cooking techniques and technologies (Chapter 2), to specific topics that are devoted not to the individual cuisines, but to their respective "building blocks." Seven chapters thus focus on topics such as vegetables, fruits and nuts; "meat, poultry, and dairy products," "fish and shellfish," beverages, and "fats and flavorings." The atomistic approach sometimes works well. Chapter 3 ("Grains and Starches"), offers perspectives on wheat in Italy, China, and Mexico which allow for comparisons between Italian and Chinese noodle cultures, or between the steamed buns of China and the baked goods of Italy as well as Spanish-influenced wheat baking in Mexico and the more hybrid flour tortilla. Similar comparisons are made with (maize) corn and rice across the three cuisines, although by the time Albala discusses potatoes and sweet potatoes (122–124), the parallels and opportunities for comparison are more limited. Recipes include Italian polenta and pasta dough, Chinese pulled noodles and dumplings, and Mexican tortillas and churros.

How well does this treatment of the material work, and for what audiences? For the development of theories of globalization and foodways, there are some inbuilt weaknesses in the approach. Perhaps as a result of the focus on "building blocks," the social dimension of food practices in the three cuisines receives relatively
little attention. There are many ways to define a meal, but Albala runs the risk of reductionism in speculating that “all food cultures construct meals of three essential parts,” these being “starch or carbohydrate,” “the main dish, either a protein, vegetable, or beans,” and “a sauce or flavorings” (102). It is not difficult to think of exceptions to this definition. More importantly, studies such as those of Borré (1991) on Inupiaq preferences in Maasai culture show not only diets that would not fit this paradigm, but entire systems of belief and cultural practice that are based on different ideas of what constitutes food. A social dimension of what constitutes a meal – encapsulated in Mary Douglas’s well-known view that “a structured event is a social occasion which is organized according to rules prescribing time, place and sequence of actions. If food is taken as part of a structured event, then we have a meal” – overcomes the problem of prescription based on what is eaten and focuses on the role of meals.

Albala’s rejection of authenticity as a useful construct also deprives the reader of an opportunity to understand the internal logic of his three chosen cuisines. Adopon’s (1989) work on Rick Bayless and his view that “to properly cook ‘authentic’ Mexican food, it is necessary to cook with passion, security (confianza) and generous spirit of the Mexican cuisine” strikes a familiar note in many traditions and suggests that authenticity does not freeze a set of ingredients or techniques in an arbitrary or artificial way, but, rather, focuses on the dynamic process of interactions among cook, food, and meal participants. We should not read a book like Albala’s for a definitive view of how to make “authentic” gorditas (for example), but if we do not learn what motivates at least some cooks to do things one way rather than another, or what memories and associations they attach to particular ways of doing things in the kitchen, we have missed out on a vital element in the construction of cuisine.

If the book does not make advances in the theoretical study of foodways, it might nevertheless be useful as a textbook for undergraduate classes. The invitation to try recipes as a way of experiencing the world cuisines is tempting, although some recipes – such as the instructions on how to roast a pig in a pit using hot rocks (230) and making fermented sausages (236–238) – will be beyond the range of the novice. The study questions are provocative, but since the book itself often does not provide material for giving substantive answers, and does not use references in the text to guide the student to further reading, it will be up to the student to work independently in pursuing the questions posed by the text. For some, this approach will not work.
In sum, this is a thought-provoking book that raises a number of questions about universality and common features in some areas of world cuisine. While I do not think it fully delivers on its promise, and while some will also find it limiting that the view of the “world” cuisines is heavily weighted towards the United States, it does suggest ways in which the subject can be further developed and taught in foodways courses.

References Cited


