

Reviews

El Susto

Karen Akins, director

Brave Little Films, 2019

75 min. <https://elsustomovie.com/watch>

In recent years, public health has taken aim at sugary beverages, the pleasurable drinks clever media campaigns have led consumers to associate with happiness. On the surface, the issue is understood as one of personal will and motivation. Decreasing—or better yet, eliminating—our consumption of these empty calories is associated with decreased risk of diabetes and certain cancers, as well as decreased incidence of tooth decay. This may seem to call for a simple behavioral change, but lowering sugary beverage consumption is a goal laden with economic, social, and even racial undertones, ripe for analysis and debate. Karen Akins, a former activist who first encountered the ruinous effects of diabetes in Mexico as a medical mission volunteer in 2008, takes on this complexity in her first documentary, *El Susto*, using Mexico as a case study.

Akins blends multiple perspectives, using narration to thread across interviews, footage of daily life, celebrations, and political and industry events, as well as commercials and other forms of popular culture. The film brings together the many voices involved in this debate: researchers, politicians, the business sector, the food industry (Coca-Cola), and civil society. Importantly, she gives voice to the Mexican population suffering the brunt of chronic health illnesses. Imagery of the dire health consequences (amputations, blindness, death) is effectively juxtaposed against the profit-driven perspectives of the industry and the politicians who have supported the industry through recent decades.

El Susto begins with *El Día de los Muertos*—the Day of the Dead—Mexico’s celebration of the passing from one world to the next. The film uses the celebration as an initial anchor to talk about type 2 diabetes, which is the main cause of death in the country, despite greater media attention being given to violent deaths and the drug cartels. Bottles of Coca-Cola sit conspicuously between flowers and other trinkets that

adorn the beautiful altars built for the celebration. Family members recount the departed’s love for the fizzy beverage, a love that they also share, even when associating Coca-Cola with their own diabetes diagnosis and the death of their loved one. Yet the narrator centers the perceived causes of diabetes on the concept of “*el susto*.” *Susto* translates as a fright, a sudden scare, or a sensation during which one’s soul momentarily leaves the body as a result of grief, traumatic events, earthquakes, kidnappings, and so on—events too common in Mexican society. According to the film, 76 percent of Mexicans believe that *sustos* cause diabetes. Yet, as the viewer soon learns, the core of the problem is not *sustos* but the politics, corruption, and trade agreements that have allowed Coca-Cola to become such an important part of everyday life in Mexico.

Akins brings to full view the consequences of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), industry power, and resource allocation on public health, echoing important recent scholarship, such as Alyshia Gálvez’s *Eating NAFTA* (2018) and Marion Nestle’s *Soda Politics* (2015). The film presents the roots of Coca-Cola’s global influence, along with contemporary views from the company’s strategic events and political rallies, where industry tactics are laid out along with its influence in policymaking. Beyond Coca-Cola, viewers are also presented with larger issues contributing to Mexicans’ love for sugary beverages: water access and safety, health care access, and the health care system’s lack of capacity to address chronic diseases, leading to greater risks of complications, disabilities, and death from mostly preventable conditions. In doing so, Akins provides evidence of how profit and the well-being of the rich have been prioritized at the expense of the poor, who more often than not are marginalized Indigenous communities in the country. Fortunately, Akins also presents solutions, showcasing Mexico’s civil society and researchers’ efforts to create impactful change, focusing on the passing of sugary beverage taxes in 2014 (which also included a tax on junk foods). The showcase is largely uncritical, praising both Mexico’s victory in passing the tax and civil society efforts to call attention to local industry influence.

The policy victories—the sugary beverage tax and the recently passed front-of-package labels—are laudable, but they sustain a focus on behavioral change that places the burden for health solely on the individual. Are there ongoing efforts to improve the health care system? Water access? Socioeconomic and racial inequities? These are a few key aspects that merit further exploration.

El Susto is a valuable contribution to motivate deeper conversations about transnational companies and the role of government to safeguard its citizens' health. The film could be incorporated into classes that tackle issues around food access, nutrition, food justice, and even migration. The film can also be viewed as a needed call for action to push for government regulation of food marketing and of industry involvement in research and policy, both of which are significant, but often overlooked, influences on individual and community health.

—Melissa Fuster, City University of New York
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Just the Tonic: A Natural History of Tonic Water

Kim Walker and Mark Nesbitt

London: Kew, 2019

144 pp. Color and black and white illustrations. \$25 / £18 (hardcover)

The next time you sip your gin and tonic, spare a thought for Doña Francisca Henriques de Ribera, countess of Chinchón and wife of the viceroy of Peru. When the beautiful countess lay languishing and feverish on her deathbed sometime around 1630, she was given a dose of a local “fever bark” and, surprisingly, recovered. So thankful was she for this miraculous cure that, the story goes, she returned to Spain to dispense the bark to the suffering of Europe. It may all sound somewhat fanciful, but the story was enough for the Swedish botanist Linnaeus to name both the tree and the genus after the countess (although he managed to drop the first “h” in the process, so it became *Cinchona*). It is the bark of the cinchona tree, and the powerful antimalarial quinine compounds it contains, that is famously the bitter flavoring in tonic water. Of course this did not happen overnight; the history of the links between cinchona, quinine, malaria, tonic

water, and gin are much more complex and more fascinating than one might suspect, as *Just the Tonic* shows.

Like all the best books focusing on single foods or drinks, the fun is in the broader contextualization. Together, co-authors Kim Walker (student of the history of plant medicines) and Mark Nesbitt (curator of the Economic Botany Collection at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, London) open up a series of different worlds to introduce us to the history of tonic water. They explore the nature of malaria and the slow voyage of discovery that led to the understanding of its transmission. We are also treated to a natural history of the tree itself, which, from the seventeenth century, was in great demand in Europe for treating fevers of all sorts. Indeed, when the Parisian pharmacist Auguste Delondre first set eyes on a specimen in the Peruvian Andes, he remarked: “That magnificent tree. For so long I had seen it in my dreams and now it was before me” (p.11). Long before the nature and causation of malaria were understood (early in the twentieth century) and long before the workings of quinine in blocking the actions of the malaria-causing parasite in the blood were appreciated (even now not perfectly understood), cinchona and its derivative quinine were being taken as both “preservative” and treatment for malaria.

Just the Tonic brings together three strands to tell a single story, mixing well-informed historical narrative and quirky anecdote. While the first part of the book focuses on quinine and its use against malaria, the second explores the cultural history of the most popular medium for administering the drug; that is, via carbonated water. In the process, we are treated to a (very) brief history of medicinal mineral waters, the rise of “aerated” or soda waters from the late eighteenth century, and the proliferation of “restorative” and “medicinal” tonic beverages—some highly alcoholic, others directed at the temperance movement—in the nineteenth century. These drinks were promoted, variously, as preventives, cures, and convalescent remedies; as stimulants either to the appetite (aperitifs) or to the digestion (digestives); and, eventually, as medicinal “tonics” and refreshing drinks in tropical climes.

The third and final part recounts the history of gin, in particular in its combination with tonic. This is perhaps better known, but the authors nonetheless manage to relate some curious occurrences along the way, such as the technologies used in procuring the necessary ice in the pre-refrigeration age. Throughout, the authors have aimed for a “magazine” style of presentation, with short articles and even shorter text-boxes inserted at regular intervals. If the overall impression is on the erratic side, this approach does have the virtue of allowing them to cover a wide range of topics. The asides are distracting but frequently fascinating (in a frustrating sort of

way). Just as one is coming to grips with the wide array of cinchona species that nineteenth-century naturalists had to grapple with, one's attention is drawn by a small text-box on the accidental invention of the color mauve (on page 46, if you are curious). In any case, the book is beautifully produced. It abounds with magnificent and sometimes surprising illustrations, all carefully chosen, coming from the unparalleled collections of Kew Gardens and the Wellcome Collection, both in London.

—David Gentilcore, *Ca' Foscari University of Venice*

Black Food Geographies: Race, Self-Reliance, and Food Access in Washington, D.C.

Ashanté M. Reese

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019
184 pp. Illustrations. \$90.00 (hardcover); \$22.95 (paper);
\$21.99 (eBook)

For more than a century, Black Americans have protested, marched, and campaigned for civil rights and equal protection under the law; in response, the US government has falteringly, piecemeal, doled out the rights of full citizenship. Concurrently, criminal, legal, and geospatial laws and systems have worked to patrol and control Black lives in the United States. These realities are not divorced from questions of food access—they are, in fact, central to them. How have Black Americans persisted, and developed foodways, within this context of pervasive state-led anti-Blackness? Ashanté Reese explores this question, what she calls making “ways out of no way” (p.9), in her ethnography, *Black Food Geographies: Race, Self-Reliance, and Food Access in Washington, D.C.*

Reese offers an important re-centering for the field of food studies—too often, our conversations ignore how food access is only one concern among many priorities in eaters' lives; and moreover, that many eaters' lives are shaped by systemic racism. *Black Food Geographies* explores, with care and nuance, the narratives of community members in Deanwood—a historically low-income, African American neighborhood in northeast Washington, D.C. Reese draws on participant observation, twenty-five interviews, and one focus group with Deanwood residents, asking: “How do we see, read, and document their food lives within, alongside, and against the food inequities anti-Blackness produces?” (p.4).

The narratives contained within *Black Food Geographies* remind us, as Reese states, that “food justice is fundamentally about racial justice” (p.11). Anti-Blackness has shaped neighborhoods, urban geography, and our economic system in profound ways; we would be mistaken to try to explore

questions of hunger and food access without examining the ways that anti-Blackness impacts the food system and the places in which eaters live. For Deanwood residents, foodways and food entrepreneurship were built within and in defiance of pervasive residential segregation and white control of urban space. One result is pride in, and emphasis on, self-reliance—understood here as ensuring not just individual gain but community resilience. This context has shaped a sort of moral food economy in Deanwood. While I wish the racialized nuance of this conscious capitalism that Black Deanwood residents engage in had been teased out a bit more, particularly in relation to narratives about Jewish- and Asian-owned groceries in the neighborhood, there is still plenty for the reader to chew on.

Black Food Geographies spotlights the vibrancy of neighborhoods labeled “food deserts.” This is an important corrective at a time when urban communities of color—particularly Black neighborhoods—are discussed as economic drains, areas of lack, ill-health, and crime. Aside from the obvious violence involved in these dismissals of humanity, Deanwood resident narratives demonstrate how this lens is inaccurate and can lead to inappropriate food access interventions. In chapter 1, Reese documents the development of Deanwood's food system, and the changes this community witnessed over the course of the twentieth century. In the 1940s, Deanwood's foodscape was reflective of its residents' experience with Deep South Agrarianism—these agricultural skills were repurposed as tools for communal self-sufficiency in their new homes. Home gardens, small farms, independently owned dry goods stores and butchers dotted Deanwood's landscape. Hucksters—entrepreneurs who sold produce or prepared food from homes or carts—were a community fixture. The second half of the century brought supermarkets to Deanwood. The arrival of Safeway challenged this informal economy of trading and bartering, and signaled the end of huckstering and many Black-owned grocery outlets. Today, much policy work and activism surrounding urban food access involves a narrow focus on attracting and retaining grocery stores. Deanwood is exemplary of how this myopic focus obscures larger questions of how sites of food access are also embedded in local social relationships; how food acquisition is often a part of community cohesion; and how large grocery chains might not holistically address community needs.

When presenting Deanwood resident narratives, Reese creates space for the messiness of ideology—this, to my eye, is an important contribution to food studies. Many scholars, myself included, can be guilty of attempting to wrangle human experience into cleanly separated boxes and linear narratives. Reese resists that urge, making this book a useful

addition to qualitative methods and writing seminars. The book is at its best when presenting these contradictory ideologies, bifurcated by class and generational differences—pride for Deanwood’s singular Black-owned corner store even though few participants regularly shop there; residents blaming themselves for the subpar produce offered at Safeway; nostalgic imaginaries of a tight-knit self-reliant Black community that young Deanwood residents extol but never actually experienced. These narratives paint a full picture of Deanwood; *Black Food Geographies* is a beautiful example of the complexity, nuance, and vibrancy that ethnography can produce.

It is vital to center BIPOC voices in discussions of food access, community development, and urban inequality. When we do so, we are reminded that questions of food inequity in these communities are inextricable from broader policies and ideologies that inflict violence on Black and brown communities. This is foregrounded powerfully at the end of the text, when Reese discusses the murder of Caylor, one of her research participants. She writes that his life “tottered at the intersections of food justice, economic justice, and racial justice as a formerly incarcerated Black man who was trying to reform his life . . . sometimes unable to meet the needs of his family” (p.136). Food was just one of myriad concerns that shaped his life. Reese asks: “Where do we go when we put food in the context of Black liberation?” (p.137). For food studies scholars, eaters, and local food systems advocates eager to learn about how to walk in allyship with this question, *Black Food Geographies* is a perfect start.

—Chhaya Kolavalli, independent scholar

De los plátanos de Oller a los Food Trucks: Comida, alimentación y cocina puertorriqueña en ensayos y recetas
Cruz Miguel Ortiz Cuadra

San Juan: Isla Negra Editores, 2020
160 pp. \$23.00 (paper)

De los plátanos de Oller a los Food Trucks: Comida, alimentación y cocina puertorriqueña en ensayos y recetas (From Oller’s plantains to food trucks: Food, eating, and Puerto Rican cuisine in essays and recipes) is a collection of essays and a brief historical cookbook that thinks through the place of food in the study of social history, economics, and politics in Puerto Rico. As Cruz Miguel Ortiz Cuadra shows, the Caribbean has been absent from discussions around food sovereignty, race, and identity even though it was the work on sugar cane and the plantation economy—conducted by Sidney Mintz—that paved the way for the field of food studies. As a sugar historian, Ortiz Cuadra documents the history of

food in Puerto Rico in *Eating Puerto Rico: A History of Food, Culture, and Identity*, published in Spanish (2006) and English (2013). This new book continues this journey, with thirteen essays that each follow one dish, food, or cultural text. It privileges a historical, social, and cultural reading exercise that explores eating and cooking practices in Puerto Rico through paintings and cookbooks, political figures and food policy, and food geographies that consist of supermarkets, popular food kiosks, restaurants, and food trucks. The book is in Spanish and all translations for the purpose of this review are my own.

The first essay analyses Francisco Oller’s painting *El velorio* (The Wake) (1893) and studies the positionality of pork, corn, plantain, and rice in the painting to question notions of labor, production, and the civilizing project of the nation through these staple foods. Similarly, essays like “La historia, el cerdo y el ‘cayne’e puerco” (History, pork, and “pork meat”), “Ínsula grasa” (Fritter isle), and “La pana de pepita y el durián” (Jackfruit and durian) emphasize the historical conditions and the historiography of foods like pork meat, fried foods, and jackfruit, a curiosity that also questions the relation between a past and a present of these foods.

“Cocine a gusto: El recetario de la modernidad” (Puerto Rican dishes: Modernity’s forgotten cookbook) is perhaps the first essay in the study of food in Puerto Rico that focuses on modern cookbooks—it inaugurates the study of the cookbook in Puerto Rico beyond strictly its function as a historic document and brings it into the field of cultural anthropology and cultural studies. In it, Ortiz Cuadra follows the place of the cookbook in the field of food studies and the three main currents in which it is studied: in the scientific realm, as a writing of history, and through the intimacy of the kitchen.

Throughout the book, Ortiz Cuadra reminds us of the influences that make up Puerto Rican cuisine—indigenous Taíno, Iberian, and African cultures—and explores the different results of this blend. This is a common trope when studying food and culture in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean. Nonetheless, Ortiz Cuadra is more interested in the place of the African diaspora in our understanding of Puerto Rican cuisine as a mestizo culinary culture. For instance, in the essay “Saber haciendo: La cocina costera en la vitrina” (To know while doing: Coastal cuisine in the shopfront), Ortiz Cuadra sees Puerto Rican cuisine as a diasporic cuisine: “fruto de éxodos constantes, de idas y vueltas de gente y alimentos, de memorias culinarias rehechas en nuevas geografías y nuevas circunstancias sociales, económicas y religiosas” (fruit of constant exodus, roundtrips of peoples and

foods, of culinary memories remade in new geographies and new social, economic, and religious circumstances) (p.85).

A recurring theme in the book is the politics of food in Puerto Rico. The two essays dedicated to the Luis Muñoz Marín era—characterized among many events by the establishment of the *estado libre asociado* or the commonwealth status and the drafting of the constitution of Puerto Rico—look at the development of Puerto Rican foodways from the 1950s. In them Ortiz Cuadra explores instances that defined public and private lives and spaces; case studies include the first lady, educator, and writer Inés María Mendoza’s experience as a cookbook writer, as well as the development of the *muñocista* supermarket and its relation to the current discontent with the food system. The closing essays highlight the contemporary Puerto Rican foodscape, from the fast-food industry in the archipelago, to a critique of the current state of the restaurant business, to the trend of food trucks in the San Juan metropolitan area.

The book concludes with a selection of historical recipes that range from a nineteenth-century recipe, *Majarete criollo* (Sweet cream of corn), to a 2019 recipe for *Gnocchi de batata* (Sweet potato gnocchi) that provides a commentary on such recipes from the author’s primary sources and emphasizes their historical affective economy.

With this book Cruz Miguel Ortiz Cuadra continues to pave the way for the study of food in Puerto Rico and invites scholars, home cooks, chefs, writers, and farmworkers to think about the historical, economic, and political conditions through which food appears at our table. A shortcoming in this book is the absence of other geopolitical spaces of the Caribbean. By centering Puerto Rico, Ortiz Cuadra reproduces the ideas of cultural ownership and national cuisines that contribute to the idea of Caribbean isolation instead of an archipelagic approach. Nonetheless, this absence indicates the much-needed work to be done and dialogues to be had on the place of the Caribbean within the field of food studies, a discussion that can contribute much to understanding colonialism, neocolonialism, race, subjecthood, and capital.

—Mónica B. Ocasio Vega, *University of Texas, Austin*

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When Banana Ruled

Mathilde Damoiseil, director

Icarus Films, 2017. Released 2018

52 mins. DVD; streaming on Docuseek2

When Banana Ruled recounts the story of the United Fruit Company (UFC) as the birth of the modern multinational corporation. The film (perhaps more aptly, “When Banana Men Ruled”) centers on the figures of Minor Cooper Keith of UFC, Samuel Zemurray of Cuyamel Fruit Company, and PR propagandist Edward Bernays, who at the turn of the twentieth century, through their industrial ambitions and marketing schemes, guided the company’s various exploits in Central America and the Caribbean. Following their careers, viewers come to understand how the banana’s transformation into the ubiquitous and beloved commodity it is today was made possible only through histories of land eviction, tax evasion, labor rights suppression, racial and ethnic divisions, and support from authoritarian regimes. By the end of the documentary, the banana is forever recast in the eyes of viewers as “a simple fruit that was capable of conquering an empire,” a trope in commodity histories that is overused precisely because it is effective (Robbins 2005). Audiences will likely come away thinking that they will never look at bananas in the same way again. That they will nevertheless continue consuming the popular yellow fruit attests to the complexities of global consumerism that are at the film’s core.

UFC’s voluminous archives have inspired food scholarship for decades, and the robust literature on bananas in the Americas makes it difficult for a historical film such as this one to provide an original contribution. That said, for well-versed food scholars and public audiences alike, it will be gratifying to see the colorful montage of visuals—from archival footage and photography, telegrams, and letters, to vintage advertisements, film clips, and television cartoons—presented in chronological fashion and guided by accessible narration. Mathilde Damoiseil stitches these materials together with intentionality, often alternating scenes of overflowing grocery stores and glitzy dance hall routines in the United States with footage of railways and dirt roads lined with barefoot laborers in the Central Americas. A giddy, rhythmic soundtrack of son Cubano, “mambo blanco” pastiche, and 1940s swing brings images of economic and political strife into even starker relief. The contrasts are jarring in the way that they should be. Interviews with a business historian, an economist, and a business philosopher add conceptual depth to the narrative, but come at the expense of

grassroots voices, already underrepresented in the archival footage that constitutes the bulk of the film.

When *Banana Ruled* is a fruitful resource for introducing students to the opacities of long-distance food systems, and for stimulating debate on the promises and ills of global capitalism, although the film's unabashed critique of American multinationals will likely strike some as too one-sided. As a visual companion, it will give life to readings that might otherwise feel distant from students' everyday lives. Instructors should note that much of the footage remains unlabeled, which may paint a somewhat placeless and timeless image of the "banana republics." Viewing the film alongside Steve Striffler and Mark Moberg's volume *Banana Wars* (2003) would help give historical and geographic specificity to what might come across as UFC's totally homogenizing grasp. Moreover, the spread of Panama disease (aka "banana wilt") as a parable of an empire "rotting from the inside" will raise important questions about the logic of infinite accumulation in a world of finite resources. Environmental histories by John Soluri (2005) and Steve Marquardt (2001) would enrich understanding of how the commercial extinction of the Gros Michel banana became the Achilles' heel to a business model that seemed impervious to consequence.

For younger audiences who may have never seen a banana commercial on television, postwar clips of the half-banana, half-woman Chiquita Banana cartoon, as well as various other ads touting the culinary versatility of the "fruit of American dreams," will surely be provocative. This reviewer's personal favorite is Dole's 1974 commercial, which features a femme fatale figure dancing on her own on a dark stage, banana in hand. Playing in the background is Pink Floyd's "The Great Gig in the Sky," a signature of 1970s counterculture repurposed to promote the largest fruit conglomerate in the world. The ad encapsulates the film's broader message about consumer advertising's many prestidigitations. This plot line reaches its dark climax when audiences learn of UFC's collusion with the CIA in the violent ouster of pro-land reform Guatemalan president Jacobo Árbenz (in office: 1951–54), and of Bernays's role in twisting public opinion on the matter with the use of Cold War rhetoric. Altogether, these scenes remind us that consumer demand is never a given but rather historically created, and often in line with broader politico-cultural agendas.

When *Banana Ruled* rushes to its conclusion after scenes of Fidel Castro's Cuba, the death of Zemurray, and the rebranding of UFC, curiously leaving audiences with the impression that empires die with their charismatic leaders. Fortunately, Damoiseil's documentary joins a list of others that expand on ongoing issues mentioned only briefly at the

film's conclusion. *Banana Land: Blood, Bullets & Poison* by Jason Glaser and Diego Lopez (2014) documents the persistent violences of the paramilitary and the overreliance on chemicals. Frederik Gertten's controversial *BANANAS!** (2009) and its sequel, *Big Boys Gone Bananas!** (2011), recounts the transnational struggle against pesticide poisoning from the trenches. Finally, a lesser-known Japanese-language documentary, *The Bitter Reality behind Sweet Bananas (Amai Banana no Nigai Genjitsu)* by the Pacific Asia Resource Center (Murakami 2018), presents a rare example of an alternative banana trade network in the Philippines, a form of "social and solidarity economics" to which the current film briefly gestures. Indeed, in many parts of the world the banana continues to rule, and its story is very much unfinished.

—Alyssa Paredes, University of Michigan

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Stirrings: How Activist New Yorkers Ignited a Movement for Food Justice

Lana Dee Povitz

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019

360 pp. Illustrations. \$90.00 (hardcover); \$29.95 (paper); \$22.99 (eBook)

Stirrings, Lana Dee Povitz's study of food activism in New York City in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, is an extraordinary achievement. At the core of the book are four rich and vivid case studies of food-focused organizing. It begins with the United Bronx Parents, an anti-poverty organization of largely African American and Puerto Rican parents who agitated to improve school lunches in the South Bronx and ended up

helping to reform school lunch policy for the entire city. Next, Povitz looks at the development of the Park Slope Coop and its New Left activist roots. Then she moves on to God's Love We Deliver, an organization that brought food and dignity to homebound sufferers of AIDS at the height of the pandemic, and finally, the Community Food Resource Center, a food-focused nonprofit that activists organized in the 1980s to fill the chasms of social need left behind by the Reagan-era assault on social services.

As I read avidly through these pages, I thought of Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, an epic 1995 study of Black freedom struggles in Mississippi in the classic Civil Rights era. Payne's book was, as he described it, a look at "spadework" organizing. In contrast to the "big" events, personalities, and narratives, he looked at the nitty-gritty efforts of those women and men who labored to advance the movement on the ground within their own communities and contexts. While the focus may be different, *Stirrings* is similarly another soon-to-be classic "spadework" history.

The book is set against backdrops like the War on Poverty, New York City's fiscal crisis of the 1970s, the haphazard and arrested development of a federal food assistance program, and the emergence of a larger and more robust nonprofit sector. But the power and dynamism of *Stirrings* comes from Povitz's capture of the spadework moments where individuals made a larger movement for food justice real.

To name a few examples, *Stirrings* brings the reader to provocative face-to-face confrontations with city and state officials, hot street corners in neighborhoods like Hunts Point and Bedford Stuyvesant as bagged lunches for school students are handed out in summertime, cramped shared offices where ideas are hatched and hashed out and the mimeograph machine never stops rolling, up four flights of stairs to bring gourmet pasta to a dying man, to crews of women, men, and even a few children hauling bags and boxes of produce fresh from the wholesale markets. In all these moments Povitz highlights movements and organizations that were not leaderless but in fact leaderful and propelled by strong people. The book moves because of these moments. Such intimate, vivid, and humanizing realities, made possible by exhaustive oral history collection, draw the reader in like few other scholarly histories can. The result is personal and powerful. One often gets a sense of the energy and hard-to-describe yet simultaneously universal feeling of being part of something larger than yourself.

In terms of the larger scholarly landscape, *Stirrings* is first and foremost an important study of urban food justice and food policies in this time frame. As of now, there is no comparable study of any city's food activism. There are many

histories that include overviews of the influential breakfast program run by the Black Panther Party, which Povitz notes, but she moves the narrative forward in showing what came next in a place like New York. On a broader scale of postwar struggles for food and racial justice, the book complements Monica White's (2019) history of Black freedom struggles and food justice and sovereignty in the South, *Freedom Farmers*. In this way the book gives us another invaluable look at the intersection of race, anti-hunger, and anti-poverty efforts.

Stirrings also provides us a lens through which to understand how, during the 1970s and '80s, many activist energies became institutionalized within the growing world of nonprofits. In this way, *Stirrings* is another helpful demonstration, among many others, that this period was not one of civic or activist decline but rather of institution building to help achieve broader social aims. This kind of spadework history shows that activist energies and impulses evolved and adapted rather than disappeared.

Stirrings also illuminates one of the central thrusts of Janet Poppendieck's still-relevant 1998 look at the development of the country's inadequate emergency food system, *Sweet Charity?*, and echoed again in works like Andrew Fisher's *Big Hunger* (2017). As Povitz compellingly argues, food is a unique vehicle for activism. As a tangible and existential need, it pulls on people's desire to get involved in a visceral way, and often manages to transcend easy political categorization and polarization. As such, food-focused organizations can often draw on a wide array of individuals as volunteers, donors, and partners. That said, as Povitz argues, while this helps draw so many to these efforts, the question remains of why we are so willing to give time and resources to fight hunger instead of the poverty and other structural and systemic failings that cause it, and raises further questions on how that can happen, and why it often does not.

I found that the only "shortcoming" of *Stirrings* was that it was not longer. This is not to say that what Povitz has given us is incomplete or underdeveloped. Rather, the richness and depth of her work left me selfishly wanting another one, two, even three case studies. Methodically, stylistically, and academically, this book is a triumph. As such, it is a very worthwhile read, particularly for those who teach food activism, social movements, as well as philanthropic and nonprofit history.

—Chris Staysniak, *College of the Holy Cross*

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The Chile Pepper in China: A Cultural Biography

Brian R. Dott

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296 pp. Color illustrations. \$32.00 (hardcover); \$31.99 (eBook)

This book is an exemplary study of a key component of cuisine in China today — the chile pepper — the history of which turns out to be full of surprises relevant to several areas of social and cultural inquiry. The author draws on the concepts of “cultural biography” and “identity food” in the service of answering a clearly formulated and significant question: “How did chile peppers in China evolve from an obscure foreign plant to a ubiquitous and even ‘authentic’ spice, vegetable, medicine, and symbol?” (p.2) This question drives most of the narrative, with an unexpected range of answers appearing in chapters dedicated to the timing and geography of the chile’s dispersal in China, its use for cuisine, its place in pharmacopeia, and twists and turns in chile aesthetics and discourse. Thus, we learn that “Chinese gardeners, farmers, cooks, medical practitioners, and writers integrated the new plant into their cultural contexts, adapting it to fit into existing cultural systems” (p.90). Also essential, however, was the “visual appeal” of chiles, which “allowed them an initial entrée into literati culture, catching the eyes of garden connoisseurs” (p.190). The chile is thus both object and (in ways reminiscent of Michael Pollen’s “botany of desire”) agent of history. What we learn is that the chile became Chinese because people from many walks of life wanted it in their life, and for many different reasons, not only (if still mostly) for cooking.

Some of these differences are evident in the history of one important chile cultivar — *Capsicum annuum* var. *conooides* ‘*Chao Tian Jiao*’ — which is but a stand-in here for the many other colorful examples that illustrate the author’s arguments. The variety *conooides* is native to Central America and, at least in Latin, is merely a “conical” pepper. In China, it becomes the “Heaven Facing (*chaotian*)” pepper, so named because it grows with its tip pointing upward rather than downward like most species of capsicum. The name itself sounds so very “Chinese” (even if translated less “Chinesely” as “skyward

facing”), and even to those of us otherwise committed to de-essentialized analysis of culture in China. English alternatives like “inverted pepper” reveal the relative poverty and richness of the linguistic worlds into which the plant has found homes. Even this single cultivar, however, found more than just one home in China. It is both ornamental and eaten, object of aesthetic appreciation and essential condiment, which in Dott’s telling reveals an important difference in elite and non-elite sensibilities toward the chile more generally.

It turns out, as the book indicates across a range of examples spanning several chapters, that the chile spread through China from the bottom up, through the everyday diets of the rural poor, despite a stubborn but eventually vanquished elite reluctance to eat them, or even in some cases just to see them. One of the more intriguing examples of elite aversion to the chile involves a gazetteer writer who insisted that a reference to the chile in an earlier edition of the same text, which he was now revising, had to be an error, and that therefore the chile was not in fact grown where somebody had once said it was. But the chile was, in fact, “grown everywhere,” just not appreciated as food all the way up the social ladder, and perhaps even less-well-understood the higher up one went. And so its history in China provides a powerful counterexample to the more common idea that centripetal elites deserve the lion’s share of credit for creating cultural cohesion across the Chinese empire and, later, nation-state. One does wonder, however, if the argument is at times pushed a bit too far. Even the author acknowledges that what looks like elite reluctance to embrace the chile may sometimes simply be regional differences in taste, evident in the writing of elites from regions where the chile has become less pervasive in cuisine.

The book also asks, “how did Chinese uses of chiles change Chinese culture?” (p.2). On the one hand, it is hard to imagine Chinese food without the chile, and indeed the change in cuisine may be the most pronounced of all. On the other hand, it depends on what region of China one is talking about. The change is especially pronounced, as Dott carefully shows, in regions with a longer history of consuming pungent (*xin*) spices or flavors, as in China’s western and southwestern regions. The chile may be present but is much less prevalent elsewhere, however. Seen in this light, the impact of the chile may be its contribution to the perpetuation and elaboration of regional difference. There are additional arguments about the impact of the chile on China, ranging from the very meaning of the term *la* (spicy) to the formulation of gender identity, whereby an idea of “spiciness” becomes part of a discourse about “spunkiness, independence, and passion” (p.193) among women, but of martial or revolutionary prowess among men. The impact on medicine, so closely

connected to food in China, is surprisingly short-lived, at least as viewed through the written record.

The book's scholarly rigor will be evident to specialists but is carefully delivered in an engaging and accessible style of writing that should make the book of interest to a wide range of audiences. It can be turned to for recipes (including one for Hunan salted chiles that, as of this writing, I only have to wait ten more days to eat). It will certainly very

quickly become the go-to source on the history of the chile in China in the English language. But most of all it reminds us to look for culinary innovation not only where we often do, in the flashy kitchens of professional chefs, but also in the long-term historical processes of everyday life, the contributions to which, like the chile in China, may be "found everywhere" (p.189).

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