Food Links, 29.08.2012

The hidden costs of **hamburgers**.

What can American's healthcare system learn from **Cheesecake Factory**?

A former McDonald's executive opens a chain of **health food restaurants**.

Baking bread in **Beirut**.

What **Ireland** eats every night.

The terrible tragedy of the **healthy eater**.

San Francisco has the largest number of restaurants **per household** in the US. New Orleans has the most bars.

Favourite dishes from countries competing in the **Olympics**.

Are Japan's eel restaurants in **danger**? (Thanks, Mum!)

**Dan Lepard**'s pop-up bakery.

Paying with **maple syrup**.

**Arabella Boxer**'s **Book of English Food**.

**Woman vs (bread) machine**.

So what *do* Britons call their **mealtimes**? (Thanks, Anupama!)

Bolivia seeks to expel **Coca Cola**.

How to make **mole**.

How to pick the perfect **mealie**.

**Lamb biryani**.

Seedless **watermelon**?

Early Modern recipes for **medicine**.

Imogen Heap sings **Chladni lines** into salt.

**Red wine** and coke.

**Lake Trout**, a deliberately crappy restaurant. In Williamsburg. Obviously.
A profile of Anita Lo, New York chef. (Thanks, Carl!)

Putting the 'h' back into yoghurt.

British icons in biscuits.

New York's biggest roof-top farm. (Thanks, Rafaella!)

Microwave turkish delight.

Four new flavours of ice cream.

Cake.

A pop-up shop which, quite literally, pops up.

Lobster and caviar burgers.

Food Links, 16.05.2012

How to control global food commodity trading.

A spike in food prices is predicted for 2013.

Egypt's kitchen uprising. (Thanks, Stephanie!)

How Mexican food became American. (Thanks, Hester!)

How poor women in rural India cope with food shortages.

Coke and Pepsi change their recipes – to avoid a cancer warning.

The dark side of soya.

What the world eats.

An entirely edible recipe book.

The vogue for squirrel meat and other forms of game. (Thanks, Millii!)

Why going to dinner with a foodie is an ordeal.

Edible silk sensors to monitor your food.

A pasta-naming game.

Sketch gets a makeover from Martin Creed.

The British government must not undermine efforts to stop the exploitation of agricultural workers.

How the conditions in which pigs are kept in the United States may be improving.

Heston Blumenthal explains the revamp of the Fat Duck.

In South Africa, bottled water is more expensive than petrol – so why its popularity?

The Middle Class Handbook on Sunday night supper.

The eight kinds of drunkenness, by Thomas Nashe.

Vodka made out of quinoa.

Should one rinse mushrooms?

A strange new phenomenon in the Middle East: children who are malnourished and obese.

How well does the language of wine tasting describe wine?

Why Big Food must go.
Five grains which could help to feed the world.

Baked beans in Maine.

Is ice cream as addictive as cocaine?

Meat theft is on the rise in the United States.

The return of the pressure cooker. (Thanks, Mum!)

What it looks like to eat on a dollar a day.

The politics of cinema snacks.

Mitt Romney's diet.

Dictator cakes for Amnesty International.

Olivier de Schutter recommends five ways to fix unhealthy diets.

How to make your own pita bread.

Not your grandmother's yogurt.

Aliens secretly study humanity under the guise of a 1960s sandwich recipe book.

Osman's shanty bar, Istanbul.

Why we have sliced bread.

Know your pasta shapes.

A new documentary about Detroit's urban farms.

Fancy dress as a side of bacon. From 1894.

How to make a chocolate model of your brain.

Food Links, 11.04.2012

Abolish the food industry.

Eight ways Monsanto fails at sustainable agriculture.

The rise and rise of KFC in Africa.

What does sweetness sound like?

Inside the matzo industry.

Jezebel is characteristically sensible about the new Caveman Diet fad.

The banana industry in 1935.

An interview with Colin Tudge.

What is mindful eating?

An interview with Judith Jones, Julia Child's editor.

Yogurt as a tool for social critique and political action in Greece. (No, really.)

Where the staff at Noma like to eat.

How sound influences how we taste food.

A new fashion for iguana meat?

The hidden messages in menus.

Pizza in a jar.
A fortnight ago my mother and I devoted a day to our annual chutney making, and we spent the evening recovering from the inhalation of vinegar fumes, in front of the television. We watched the first episode of the new series of Nigel Slater’s Simple Suppers. Being fans of Slater’s recipe books, we had high hopes, but these began to crumble when he remarked conspiratorially to the camera that ‘some people buy jars of pesto.’

We groaned. Of course, pesto out of a bottle is never going to be quite as amazing as pesto made freshly. (I’m not going to wade into the tiresome debate over whether pesto made in a food processor is better than that made with a pestle and mortar.) But it’s fine. Really: for a quick, warming supper, it’s absolutely delicious. And, as my father pointed out as he walked past to switch the kettle on, it’s great to be able to support businesses which train people and provide employment.

As an antidote to Slater’s preciousness, I read a couple of Calvin Trillin’s essays from Eating with the Pilgrims, a collection published in Penguin’s newish Great Food series (the one with the beautiful covers). Although he’s also a poet and journalist, Trillin is probably best known for his food writing in the New Yorker. His writing is clear,
clever, and deeply sympathetic to others who, like him, love eating. Trillin tends not to write about food itself, but, rather about how people think about it, as he remarked in an interview: ‘I'm not interested in finding the best chilli restaurant in Cincinnati. I'm interested in Cincinnatians fighting about who has the best chilli.’

What I like about Trillin is that he writes about buffalo wings and barbeque with the same seriousness that other writers devote to stilton or cassoulet:

> The sort of eating I've always been interested in is what I guess you'd call vernacular eating. It has something to do with a place. Buffalo chicken wings have something to do with Buffalo. The fact that people in Cincinnati have something they call authentic Cincinnati chilli, and seem unaware that people in the Southwest eat chilli, let alone Mexicans, and think that chilli is made by Macedonians and served on spaghetti, that's interesting to me. Whether Skyline chilli is better than Empress chilli I don't really care about.

This is Trillin on fried chicken:

> Because a superior fried-chicken restaurant is often the institutional extension of a single chicken-obsessed woman, I realize that, like a good secondhand bookstore or a bad South American dictatorship, it is not easily passed down intact. Still, in sullen moments I blame these lamentable closings on the agribusiness corporations' vertical integration of the broiler industry. In fact, in sullen moments I blame almost everything on the vertical integration of the broiler industry – the way some people trace practically any sort of mischief or natural disaster back to the Central Intelligence Agency, and some people, presumably slightly more sophisticated, blame everything on the interstate-highway program. If the civilisation really is about to crumble, everybody is entitled to his own idea of which is the most significant crack. Which brings us to Kentucky Fried Chicken.

I urge you to read Trillin's excellent cultural history of buffalo wings and his fantastic account of seeking the best barbequed mutton in Kentucky. My favourite essay, other than his celebration of Shopsin’s, the legendary-despite-its-best-efforts New York restaurant, is about boudin, a staple of Cajun cuisine which is, in its purest form, a kind of sausage made out of pork meat, rice, and liver. (I wish I could provide a link, but the New Yorker has an unfriendly unwillingness to open up its archives.)

These are not particularly sophisticated dishes, and they're often produced with a heavy reliance on processed foods – pre-packaged seasonings, the inevitable Campbell's mushroom soup – whose flavours become as important to the finished product as those elements which make boudin or buffalo wings unique. In fact, in between Slater's snobbery and Trillin's celebration of deliciousness is a useful way of thinking about what we mean by processed food.
We know that the cheapness and easy availability of processed food has been blamed, rightly, for facilitating a global obesity epidemic. (Even if the increasing prevalence of obesity can't logically be described as an 'epidemic'. Obesity isn't really catching.) High in salt, preservatives, and calories, most processed food provides eaters with meals which are temporarily filling and satisfying, but without much beneficial nutritional content. In food deserts – areas where low incomes, and poor transport infrastructure and distribution networks make access to fresh food very difficult – it's usually only processed food which is available at corner shops and discount supermarkets.

But, technically, most food that we eat – even 'good' food – is processed. I know that blogs have been criticised for simply listing the contents of bloggers' fridges, but I'm doing this for a reason: with the exception of the eggs, lettuce, leeks, herbs, and cherries in my fridge, the rest of it is processed. This includes the milk and cream (nearly all dairy products are pasteurised and homogenised before they're sold to the public), blackberry jam, sun dried tomatoes (laugh if you must), butter, Colman's and Pommery mustard, mum's and Mrs Ball's chutney, salami, tomato paste, and the tube of sweetened chestnut puree.

By 'processed food' we mean food that is prepared in some way before it's sold: from the most severely limited run of cured hams, to the strangest possible non-food imaginable. So it's not all bad. In fact, I'm not sure that most of us would cope without processed food of some variety: I can't buy raw milk in Cape Town, and I rely on tinned tomatoes and frozen peas. I am not about to make my own couscous, or knit my own yogurt, despite being politically left-wing.

We do, though, eat more processed food than ever before. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century as food production became increasingly industrialised, first in the United States and then in the rest of the world, our diets have changed. We eat more of those products which are difficult or time-consuming to prepare at home (bread, pasta), and mass production has made formerly expensive, 'artisan' items (Parmesan cheese, chocolate) cheaper and more readily available.

I think that that one of the reasons why I was surprised by Slater's snobbery was because of the lengthy and often quite nostalgic descriptions of the processed food of the 1960s in his memoir Toast. We tend to associate the rise of processed food with the post-war boom: with bizarre recipes for spam fritters, and a hundred and one ways with Angel Delight. In the modernist 1950s, this was the sophisticated food of the future – the food of the newly prosperous middle classes. Michael Pollan remembers:

"The general consensus seemed to be that 'food' – a word that was already beginning to sound old-fashioned – was destined to break its surly bonds to Nature, float free of agriculture and hitch its future to Technology. If not literally served in a pill, the meal of the future would be fabricated in the laboratory out of a wide variety of materials, 'as one contemporary food historian predicted, including not only algae and soybeans but also petrochemicals. Protein would be extracted directly from fuel oil and then spun and woven into “animal” muscle – long wrist-thick tubes of “fillet steak.”"

By 1965, we were well on our way to the synthetic food future. Already the eating of readily identifiable plant and animal species was beginning to feel somewhat recherché, as food technologists came forth with one shiny new product after another: Cool Whip, the Pop-Tart, nondairy creamer, Kool-Aid, Carnation Instant Breakfast and a whole slew of eerily indestructible baked goods (Wonder Bread and Twinkies being only the most famous).

The appeal of cake mixes, tinned macaroni cheese, and, later, boil-in-the-bag meals
was that these were quick, labour-saving dinners. As middle-class women entered the workforce in ever-increasing numbers, so eating habits adapted to new work patterns.

The backlash against processed food and industrialised agriculture of the 1970s – in the United States, the largely California-based counter-cuisine, for example – associated the mass production of food with environmental destruction and social inequality. (Poorer people tend to eat the worst processed food.) We've since begun to associate the idea of processed food with strange non-foods – with turkey twizzlers and cheese strings – rather than think of it as food which has been prepared in some way, and usually in large quantities, before being sold.

I know that this may seem like a fairly nitpicky point, but we need to acknowledge the extent to which we rely on processed food in order to feed ourselves. Most of us eat better and a greater variety of things because of the mass production of food. To my mind, the more pertinent question is not how we should prevent people from eating processed food, but, rather, how we can make this food better and healthier. Obviously, we need to teach people how to cook healthily – and we have to consider the relationship between eating patterns and the hours that people work. Middle-class foodies and other well-meaning campaigners around nutrition must realise that their anti-processed food stance is not only a kind of snobbery, but entirely impractical.

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Food Links, 26.10.2011

The truth about right wing politics and cupcakes.

If you read any of these links, please make it this one: why being vegetarian is not a political choice.

The worst recipes ever.

Baking + the Tube = genius.

A history of pineapples in London.

Ferran Adrià has written a recipe book for families.

On the food served at festivals in India. And what do you eat at Diwali?

Interesting ice cream flavours.

The origins of anti-margarine laws in the US.

The psychology of yogurt.

Is a burrito a sandwich?

The appeal of novelty carrots.

On cooking from the first edition of Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management

Fifty of the world's best breakfasts. (Thanks, Sarang!)

Occupy the pasture.

These five links are courtesy of my eagle-eyed Mum:

On food as inspiration for fashion.

Moments of Zen in Sam Sifton's restaurant reviews.

Bolognese Machiavelli.
How to make apple-free apple pie.

On TV dinners and the making of an American identity.

Food Links, 13.07.2011

This is possibly the best blog ever (other than this one, obviously): a guide to historic bars.

Ella McSweeney reports on proposed legislation in Ireland to ban the sale of raw – or unpasteurised – milk.

Ferran and Albert Adrià have opened tapas and cocktail bars in Barcelona: ‘We’ll do the impossible right away. For the miracles we need a little more time.’

This is a fantastic interview with food historian Steven Kaplan on food history.

Some lovely-looking American pie recipes.

Consider the bagel. Or the beigel.

How long can humans survive without food and water?

The Observer Food Monthly takes a look at a decade of eating in Britain – and at the top ten trends in food.

Madhur Jaffrey talks about her career.

The New York Times unpacks the marketing behind ‘functional foods’.

Wow, Georgia O’Keeffe had a taste for utterly revolting cooking.

Exploding watermelons demonstrate particularly well why it’s a generally a good idea to regulate properly what farmers may and may not use to fertilise their crops.

Whose Slow Food?

While I was a PhD student in London I stayed at a really magnificent residence for postgraduate students in Bloomsbury. Our closest supermarket was a Waitrose which distributed leaflets to the local student population every September (the beginning of the academic year in the UK). Their most successful campaign stated simply, ‘Make your Mum happy. Shop at Waitrose.’ I did as I was told, and shopped at Waitrose. And Mum was indeed very happy.

In Britain, admitting that you shop at Waitrose is similar to calling yourself a Guardian reader; it denotes not only class status (Waitrose is very bourgeois), but also a set of values. Waitrose is like Woolworths in South Africa or, to a lesser extent, Trader Joe’s in the United States. It’s a business which has a commitment to stocking ethically-sourced, free range, and organic products and groceries – hence its association with the lefty, greeny, and affluent middle classes.

It does seem to be hypocritical to admit to shopping at Waitrose – or the even more expensive Marks & Spencer, which attracts a slightly different demographic – while vilifying those who depend on budget chains like Tesco in the UK or Shoprite in South Africa. After all, they’re all supermarkets, and it’s clear that supermarkets are responsible for over a million tonnes of wasted food per year in Britain alone; engage in environmentally harmful practices; exploit their employees; stifle small and local producers; destroy communities; and encourage poor eating habits.

But not all supermarkets are the same. Tim Lang, the food policy expert who invented the term food miles, suggests that one of the best ways of eating responsibly is to shop at supermarkets which preselect their products on ethical lines. So instead of buying free-range beef directly from the farmer (something which very few of us can do, in practical or financial terms), we should – if we can – shop at supermarkets which encourage this kind of farming. And we should place
pressure on bigger chains to stock free range eggs and meat.

I love supermarkets. They're one of the first places I visit when I go to new cities. When I stayed with a friend in Zürich last year I enjoyed the Swiss supermarkets (the yogurt!) almost as much as the Kunsthau (the Giacometti statues!). Supermarkets tell us things about how a population thinks about its relationship with food.

It's partly for this reason that I am concerned about the motives of the Slow Food Movement. Founded in Italy in 1986, and as a global organisation three years later, the Slow Food Movement is now a wealthy, international network of 'convivia' – or local branches – which encourage a 'slow' attitude towards food. Its members are encouraged to cook and to eat slowly, and also to think more carefully about how their food is produced and sold.

With its emphasis on localism and sustainability, Slow Food has, I think, done a great deal of good. It's one of the forces behind the increasing popularity of farmers' markets, and I'm particularly impressed by its publicising of the working conditions of farm workers, many of whom are migrants who are exploited ruthlessly by their employers.

The world is certainly a better place for the existence of Slow Food, but I am concerned by two aspects of its manifesto: its enthusiasm for regional food, which I'll discuss next week, and its argument that we all cooked and ate better in the past. As an interview with the Movement's founder and chair, Carlo Petrini, notes:

*Slow Food launched courses to put consumers in touch with the producers of the food and wine they enjoyed, recreating the umbilical cord that was cut when supermarkets invaded the market place.*

Petrini adds:

*The idea of the modern has been superseded; the challenge today is to return to the small scale, the handmade, to local distribution – because today what we call 'modern' is out of date. The crisis we have been facing in the past year is not merely a financial crisis but also a crisis of systems and values. To overcome it we need to change our behaviour.*

Slow Food was founded at a time when McDonalds and the first big supermarkets opened their doors in Italy. It disapproves of supermarkets on the grounds, as Petrini suggested, that they facilitate a 'fast' way of living which relies on the consumption of processed food and does not allow for the enjoyment of cooking and eating. Slow Food asks for a return to 'traditional' eating patterns which celebrate 'ancient' knowledge about food. For all its efforts to think about the future of food, Slow Food seems to build its model of an ideal system on a set of ideas about 'traditional' cooking and eating.

As an historian, I am always suspicious of any movement or organisation which demands a return to or rekindling of tradition. Petrini and Slow Food are pretty vague as to which 'tradition' – which 'past' – they'd like to return. And considering that Slow Food is a global movement, they seem to imply that all countries and regions have a similar, glorious food past which they should revitalise.
I'd like to know how they would propose to do this in South Africa. Even the most cursory overview of life in late nineteenth-century Cape Town suggests that a return to the past isn't necessarily a great idea. All white, upper middle-class households employed cooks who, although supervised by their mistresses, were responsible for providing families' meals. These families ate well: meat every day, even if it was **reheated** meat, with a variety of vegetables, both cooked and raw, starch of some kind, and usually a pudding with tea or coffee. This was an international diet. Visitors to Cape Town and surrounding towns commented that they ate as well – or even better, given the quality of local produce – in these affluent homes as they did at home in Britain or the United States.

Depending on the generosity of the household, servants may have eaten the same as their masters and mistresses, but, more likely, ate scraps from the table. So most of the food in these families was prepared and cooked by employees, many of whom did not share the same good diet.

Middle- and lower-middle-class households would have employed a maid-of-all-work who would have done some cooking, assisted by her mistress. The reason why a cook was such a desirable addition to the household – and cooks were the most expensive servants to employ – was the sheer backbreaking nature of nineteenth-century cooking. Meat was bought in bulk, with the cook or mistress having to cut down a whole or half-carcass of beef, lamb, or pork herself. All baking had to be done on one day per week – leaving little time for the equally laborious weekly laundry – and the lack of refrigeration meant that dairy products had to be used quickly. A spoiled batch of bread on Monday meant no bread for the rest of the week. Want to make a jelly? Well, you'd have to buy calves' feet, crack them open, and boil them down to create a jelly which could be added to milk or a fruit puree.

‘Malay’ households padded out diets with rice and fish. The **bredies** and **breyanis** which we associate with Cape Malay cooking today were reserved for special occasions. Eggs and dairy products were expensive, even for wealthier households. For the poor in Cape Town's slums, most meals consisted of a starchy staple – maize porridge, rice, or, possibly, bread – along with fish or whatever else could affordably garnish an otherwise unappetising, and not particularly nutritious, meal. And poor households would have had only one main meal.

These are only some of the diets eaten in South Africa during this period, but I've used them to demonstrate how difficult it is to define what we mean by a food tradition. Which one of these Capetonian diets should we return? To the one eaten by white, upper-middle class families? If so, should we ask one member of our households to devote her- or himself to the laborious preparation of these meals? This tiny proportion of colonial society ate precisely the kind of diet promoted by the Slow Food Movement – completely locally-sourced and homemade – but it required one person working all day to execute it in its entirety.

Women, in particular, need to take a closer look at Slow Food. We're the ones who tend – still – to cook for our families, and much of Slow Food's criticism of contemporary eating rests on a belief that something in the way in which families ate went profoundly wrong during the 1960s and 1970s. The mass entry of women into employment during these decades did mean that eating patterns changed, but I refuse to return to a time when my role would be limited to keeping house. And I can't, and won't, employ someone else to do my cooking for me. It's interesting that Slow Food emerged from Italy, a country with a distinctly bad track record on women's rights.

It's for this reason that I think that Slow Food's opposition to supermarkets is misguided. Of course, and as I've noted above, supermarkets do an enormous amount of harm, but they do allow us to feed ourselves affordably and conveniently. To reject them entirely, when so many people rely on them, is not the way to create a sustainable food system. But, possibly more importantly, I disagree with Slow Food's belief that we need to return to the past to improve the future. We can certainly learn from the past, but this reification of 'tradition' can only be dangerous. Who
decides which ‘tradition’ we should turn to? And who’ll cook it?

Further Reading

Texts cited here:


Other sources:


Carol Helstosky, Garlic and Oil: Politics and Food in Italy (London: Berg, 2004).


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I'm Sarah Emily – that's me about to eat an enormous breakfast – and welcome to my blog. I'm a South African historian who's specialised in histories of childhood, food, and medicine.

This is not a food blog, but, rather, a blog about food – and, more specifically, about food, eating, and cooking. The world has enough recipes for red velvet cake floating around the internet. Here, I'm taking a closer look at the complex relationships between eating and identity; between cooking and politics; and between food and power.

Read more >