FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Cooking

Food: The History of Taste
Paul Freedman, editor
Thames and Hudson
978-0-520-25476-3
(November 7, 2007)

What is taste? Is it that those who eat raw meat are commonly called barbarians? Or that British and American cuisine is considered bland by most of the rest of the world? That Hindus won't eat meat, but Mohammed called it "the lordliest food of the people." What makes rotten milk a delicacy in one part of the world and revolting in another? And why was chili an important condiment in Central America, but failed to impress the tribes of the north?

"[T]he idea that a society's soul is revealed by its cooking has, in fact, been with us since earliest times," Paul Freedman writes in his introduction to this fascinating and beautiful volume. But this is not a book about the history of cooking—although there is plenty of that too—it's a study of how people in different cultures have thought about food, and how they have treated it in daily life. After all, civilization's triumvirate of glories include painting, poetry…and gastronomy.

But life wasn't always so rich. In prehistory, humans most likely scavenged to fill their bellies, and the concept of "rotten" is a relative one. As soon as tribes began to settle, however, a connection between social status and food arose. Fresh food was a luxury in the Middle Ages, and although wine, oil, and grain were the gods' most cherished gifts to Greeks, cheese and salt were rare.

In Imperial China, the choice of food was both practical and symbolic. Although not quite one of the Seven Deadly Sins, excessive eating was strongly discouraged in moral literature and practice. Moderation and balance were the rule: *fan*, for the rice, meaning "to fill," and *cai* meaning "to flavor." *Ying* signified the cooling aspect of an ingredient, and *yang* the heating. Classical Greece had a similar philosophy of cuisine (probably imported from China), and named four *humors* (blood, black bile, yellow bile, phlegm) and their essences (heat, cold, dry, moist). Medieval Europe resurrected the idea and ran with it, suggesting that the universe consisted of only four elements and that digestion was a form of cooking.

New World exploration brought the miracle of the potato about the same time as Europeans settled on table manners ("It is boorish to plunge your hands into sauced dishes," Erasmus said). But it was industrialization that really changed the world, as it hugely affected the way poor people ate. Prior to the 1800s, food for the majority was scarce, diluted, and poorly prepared. Industrialization brought life-saving advances in processing, preservation, and transportation. For the first time in history, people could fill themselves without emptying their pockets.

Color plates and captions delight and illustrate the informed and absorbing essays in *Food: The History of Taste*, making this an excellent book for the reference shelf, for the cook, for the gift-giver.

Heather Shaw