Tortillas, Tiswin & T-Bones: A Food History of the Southwest

Gregory McNamee
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This food study forwards a fascinating human history of a region like no other.

Gregory McNamee’s fascinating Tortillas, Tiswin & T-Bones: A Food History of the Southwest is a wonderfully absorbing foodie saga that drills down to the heart of its chosen locale.

Starting with the rise of mammals, the book follows a chronological pattern, adding layer upon layer as geography, climate, humans, and hunger collide on the Southwestern frontier. A book that starts with indigenous tribes following mammoths ends with office workers using apps to find their favorite lunchtime food trucks.

Aside from imparting the pleasure of learning more about a distinct cuisine, this book is set apart by its careful approaches. It takes the time to define “Southwest” in food terms. High Colorado and slices of extreme western Oklahoma and Kansas are included because they share Mexican and Texan food traditions, while Nevada and Utah are excluded from the narrative because their food traditions are largely Midwestern.

Here, Southwestern cuisine is equal parts Hispanic, Native American, and Anglo. This is another of the book’s strengths: it does not, as many food books do, start with the arrival of European immigrants, but begins with Native American food culture, a well-established cuisine that relied solely on plants and animals available in the region. Nor does the book end with the arrival of Europeans—chapters also focus on African Americans who, post-Civil War, brought Southern cuisine west of the Mississippi, and on the Asian influences that arrived with Chinese railroad builders and Japanese farm workers.

The narrative pace can be a bit slow at times, but the details unearthed in the course of the work are worth the slog. There are numerous recipes for Southwestern dishes both ancient and recent, ranging from the amaranth pasta of the Aztecs to today’s California rolls. Black-and-white photographs tend to be small and individually unexceptional, but together they build an effective visual time line. The references consulted, given separately for each of the book’s dozen chapters, bring many serious and often-overlooked food studies to attention.

Tortillas, Tiswin & T-Bones is more than a food study, it’s also the fascinating human history of a region like no other.

SUSAN WAGGONER (November/December 2017)

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