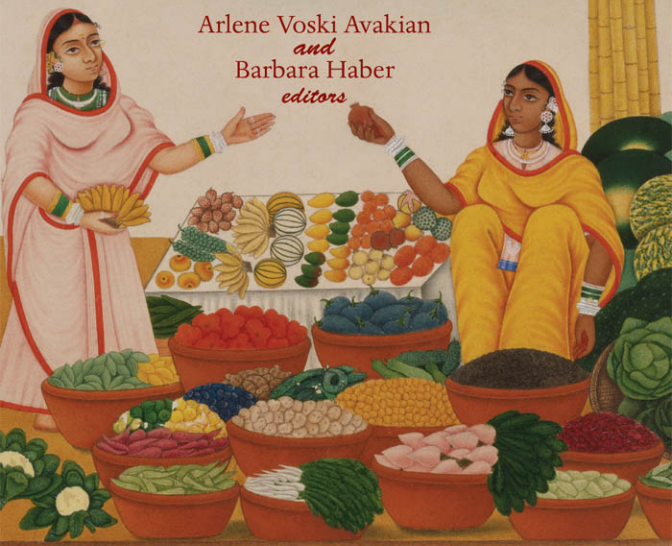
From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies

Critical Perspectives on Women and Food

Arlene Voski Avakian
and
Barbara Haber
editors



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Contents

Preface vii

Feminist Food Studies: A Brief History
Arlene Voski Avakian
Barbara Haber 1

The Marketplace

"I Guarantee": Betty Crocker and the Woman in the Kitchen
Laura Shapiro 29

Counterintuitive: How the Marketing of Modernism Hijacked the Kitchen Stove
Leslie Land 41

Feeding Baby, Teaching Mother: Gerber and the Evolution of Infant Food and Feeding Practices in the United States
Amy Bentley 62

Domesticating the Restaurant: Marketing the Anglo-American Home
Jan Whitaker 89

Histories

Martha Ballard: A Woman's Place on the Eastern Frontier
Nancy Jenkins 109

Cooking to Survive: The Careers of Alice Foote MacDougall and Cleora Butler
Barbara Haber 120

Women under Siege: Leningrad 1941–1942
DARRA GOLDSTEIN 143

Representations

Hiding Gender and Race in the Discourse of Commercial Food Consumption
ALICE P. JULIER 163

Indian Spices across the Black Waters
SHARMILA SEN 185

The Border as Barrier and Bridge: Food, Gender, and Ethnicity in the San Luis Valley of Colorado
CAROLE M. COUNIHAN 200

Resistances

Women Who Eat Too Much: Femininity and Food in *Fried Green Tomatoes*
LAURA LINDENFELD 221

Chili Peppers as Tools of Resistance: Ketan Mehta's *Mirch Masala*
BEHEROZE F. SHROFF 246

Shish Kebab Armenians?: Food and the Construction and Maintenance of Ethnic and Gender Identities among Armenian American Feminists
ARLENE VOSKI AVAKIAN 257

Notes on Contributors 281
Index 285

Preface

Arlene Voski Avakian
Barbara Haber

When Barbara Haber developed the large cookbook collection at the Schlesinger Library at Harvard University's Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies, many feminists and women's studies scholars were not supportive of her interest in these works. Cookbooks, they argued, were a mark of women's oppression and should not be collected in a major American library committed to the history of American women. The idea that cookbooks are documents of women's history, a perspective that seems so obvious now, was not generally accepted when Haber made this argument in the 1970s. Decades later when Avakian told colleagues in women's studies she was working on an anthology of writing by feminists about their relationship to food and cooking, most smiled and changed the subject. Some would occasionally ask her how her cookbook was coming along despite her repeated attempts to explain she was using food, a constant and necessary presence in human life, to investigate the complexity of women's intersecting social identities. She was not, she reminded them, editing a cookbook. They were, however, puzzled. Had she not said she was including some recipes in the book? Yes, she had. Reading a recipe along with an essay, she was convinced, could provide another perspective on an issue, a relationship, or an individual. Much could be learned about contents by knowing both the specific ingredients and the techniques of cooking. To her dismay, when the book was published bookstores often shelved it with cookbooks rather than with women's studies volumes.

We now expect many bookstores to be creating sections for works such as Avakian's because of the publication of a plethora of volumes on what has come to be called food studies. We welcome the recognition of scholars and publishers that the study of food can be an important avenue to understanding both historical and contemporary society. These exciting new works, along with the many conferences on the subject, have resulted in significant insights about a variety of subjects in diverse fields. But while we have been gratified that the dailiness of the cooking and serving of food, these most mundane activities, is now

being seen as its most valuable asset, we have at the same time been frustrated that so much of the work in food studies has neglected gender, despite women's centrality to food practices. And while a number of women's studies scholars are writing about food, many of these new works look at gender in isolation from other social formations, sometimes entirely omitting women who are defined as "other," or "including" them while keeping white, EuroAmerican women at the center.

We began to consider editing a volume by scholars and food writers whose work incorporated gender with the most exciting of women's studies approaches: interdisciplinary analyses that embed women's lives in race/ethnicity, class, colonialism, and capitalism. We wanted to know what women's studies scholars and food writers whose previous writings had addressed women's issues were thinking about women and food within these contexts. What fundamental questions would they raise? How would they push food studies and women's studies to an analysis beyond "inclusion"?

Rather than providing detailed studies in one discipline or limiting the range of essays to a time period or region of the world, we solicited contributions from the scholars we considered to be among the more exciting in the fields, asking them to write original essays for this collection. By allowing them to give us their latest thinking, we hoped these essays would bring new approaches to the study and conceptualization of women and food, provoking new questions as well as providing some answers. We were not disappointed by essays that asked: how the food industry constructs who does what in the kitchen, for whom, with what ingredients, and on what appliances; how in their food practices women resist oppression through racism, colonialism, and globalization; how women survive starvation conditions; how ethnicity intersects with gender, race, and class through cooking, serving, and eating food; how food practices are implicated in the construction of American whiteness; how we may be complicit in racialized gender constructions as consumers of both food and representations of gender and food.

These essays cross many borders. Their interdisciplinary analyses do not separate gender from other social formations, and many essays also consider power relations of nation and state, placing women into their globalized geopolitical contexts. Such essays are difficult to group into categories. After trying many combinations with various titles, we came to recognize that these pieces could not be satisfactorily kept within rigid boundaries. We intended to edit a volume of essays that addressed gender and food from an integrative women's studies perspective, giving authors latitude to define the issues, and many of the resulting essays

defy boundaries, pushing against their placement, wandering into other categories. Finally, we saw that they are better put into loosely titled groupings that are more suggestive than definitive. The questions these essays raise and the arguments they present are beginning to map the terrain of what we may now call feminist food studies.

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