

Menu: Introduction to Special Issue on Food



This special issue of *Common-place* explores food. It particularly investigates the production and consumption of food during the age of experiment, that period between 1820 and 1890 in the United States after the soil crisis of the early nineteenth century disrupted customary agriculture and before scientific agriculture became institutionalized nationally in the system of experimental stations legislated into being by the Hatch Act (1887).

Just as current experimentation in agriculture is driven by the increasingly deleterious effects of conventional agriculture on the land (the mineralization of soils, the depletion of aquifers by "thirsty" GMO crops, the growing toxicity of fields subjected to heavy-handed and repeated chemical supplementations), the nineteenth-century age of experiment began in response to a soil crisis. The need to renovate fields whose fertility had been exhausted by repeated plantings of cash crops such as tobacco, cotton, and corn led farmers to introduce new cultivars into new rotations employing new manuring schemes. Change brought benefits. The range of fruits and vegetables available at market expanded, and the great age of plant and livestock breeding commenced. During this period, reading became a necessity for food growers and an advantage for food preparers. A world of agricultural letters burgeoned after the launching of *The American Farmer* in 1819. A rich cookbook literature also grew expansively decade by decade over the course of the century. The era

of experiment was marked by several features besides the recourse to print culture: the widespread abandonment of the old humoral picture of nutrition and medicine and the adoption after 1845 of the food chemistry of Justus Liebig; the organization of agricultural societies and cooking schools; the integration of farms and households into local, regional, and national food markets; the rise of market growers and seed brokers; the creation and promotion of model farms and plantations; the expansion of the world of competitive exhibitions in fairs and livestock shows, and the shift from hearthside to stove top cookery. One can also point to the proliferation of sumptuary ideologies and food philosophies aimed at perfecting the body while purifying the spirit.

Food Studies in 2011 has become a complex set of engagements between what had been different inquiries. Best known to historians, perhaps, has been the recovery of the creative kitchen and garden labors of women and domestic servants in the conduct of common life, the approach exemplified by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's *Within the Plantation Household* or Rebecca Sharpless's *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens*. Then, there is the search for origins, the attempt to trace cultural legacies, an approach exemplified by Karen Hess's *The Carolina Rice Kitchen*. Another approach, associated with lived history projects, is the recovery of old cooking practices in works such as William Rubel's *The Magic of Fire: Hearth Cooking*. Gardeners have engaged in horticultural recoveries, exploring the bio-archive in germ plasm banks to restore landrace grains and heirloom plants to cultivation and promote their culinary use; gardener, writer, and heirloom seed champion William Woys Weaver serves as a case in point here. Then there is the exploration of agricultural literature to locate the best practices of pre-industrial farming in an attempt to supply an effective alternative to the chemical supplementation schemes, GMO plant breeding, and water-intensive cultivation practices of conventional farming.

In this issue the contributions reflect all of these approaches. Jan Longone, the cookbook collector and scholar, shows us the genre in light of its representational innovations, rather than as a vehicle for transmitting the cultural past. Trudy Eden in her examination of the problems of interpreting recipes does treat the past—the experiential past of the recipe reader making sense of the bespoke dimensions of the written instructions. Eden suggests what more we have to know to make the dishes work. As a challenge to cook-readers, the editor has gathered a representative sampling of recipes to adapt to home use. Michael Twitty, who demonstrates antebellum African-American hearthside cooking for historical sites, reflects on what he has learned beyond what has been captured in the written record, about that distinctive and influential foodway. Caroline Sloat, using a wealth of primary sources, meditates on the unrestrained harvesting of wild pigeons, which offers a foretaste of the twenty-first century depletion of the oceanic fisheries. Three pieces treat, respectively, grains, fruits, and vegetables. Glenn Roberts, one of the most celebrated restorers of the world's landrace grains, explains how and why these ancient crops have become imperiled and what is being done to keep them in cultivation. Bernard Herman discusses the cultivation of the fig

and its survival on the landscape despite its minimal circulation through the market system. I explore the place of root vegetables in the operation of farms, and how the tastes of animals mattered as greatly as humans in instructing the creation of new varieties by plant breeders. The contents of the issue fulfill the imperatives of the new Food Studies: to view eating as an agricultural act, to understand consumption in conjunction with production and processing, to view instruction in light of practice, and the past in tension with the present.

What, in the end, are the stakes of these recoveries? Repatriating cultivars developed during the experimental age (when taste stood foremost amongst the desiderata in breeding, not transportability, eye appeal, or disease resistance) restores pleasurability to the center of the eating experience. For growers, the recovery of the best practices of pre-industrial growers arms those who desire an alternative to our increasingly costly industrial system with knowledge of how to build soil, improve taste, and enhance the productivity of grains and vegetables. This is a knowledge that contemporary organic farmers have in large measure lost. Farming will not be right in the United States until the bees fly above our heads and the earthworms replenish the soil beneath our feet. When science marries with old wisdom and gastronomy encourages agricultural sustainability as well as pleasure, then the new initiatives in food studies will have borne fruit.

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