

Review: The Life of Cheese: Creating Food and Value in America

Reviewed Work(s): The Life of Cheese: Creating Food and Value in America by Heather Paxson

Review by: Benjamin Aldes Wurgaft

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Sharma argues that officials of the East India Company and, later, British colonial officers saw themselves as carving a “garden” landscape out of “wild” jungle. Along the way, the British used labor recruitment to replace what they saw as “Assam’s placid, enervated, and indolent . . . native[s]” with migrant “coolies,” now known as “Tea Tribes” and “Adibasis” (p.236).

While Sharma’s analysis of the dispossession and re-peopling of Assam will pique conversations between labor and environmental historians, her discussion of worker recruitment and migration will most likely appeal to food studies scholars and readers interested in the social history of tea. As in other tea-growing regions, colonial capital backed the migration of people to Assam and their conversion into a disciplined agricultural proletariat. Sharma traces the process by which migrant indentured laborers became subjects of the Assamese state. She contextualizes the movement of tea plants and tea laborers within other migrations: of Marwari traders, Nepali graziers and milkmen, and farmers and cultivators from the Bengal plains. The description in Part Two of the subsequent fusion of racial and class identities, notably among the Assamese gentry whose hopes that tea would usher in an era of prosperity were dashed by colonial power and racism, is among the most original contributions of *Empire’s Garden*.

Sharma’s analysis of migration is not limited to the well-documented movement of laborers from India’s famine-ridden eastern plains to Assam. She gives welcome attention to British recruitment of Chinese “skilled” tea laborers to the region (pp.35–38). By doing so, Sharma lays an important foundation for future historical and ethnographic work on Chinese communities in India; moreover, she highlights the crucial role of colonial agro-industry in the making of the multicultural Indian body politic.

Assam’s elites, too, worked to convert themselves and their homeland into an “Indo Aryan” community. In Part Two, Sharma analyzes the dynamics of what she calls “contending publics” in the development of the Assamese political class as the tea industry grew during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For readers interested in the political and intellectual geographies that attended colonial plantation production, Sharma’s discussion of the links between Assam and Calcutta will be thought provoking.

In her conclusion, Sharma turns briefly to a discussion of Assam’s postcolonial politics and brings readers back to the themes of tea and political tumult. Though readers may be familiar with Assam’s entry into the fair trade and organic tea market, Sharma’s book stands as a potent reminder that such “ethical consumption” strategies “[obscure] the ongoing

reality of life in a postcolonial commodity garden,” where the legacies of British racial and linguistic taxonomies percolate into subnational politics (p.234). She notes that the vast majority of Assam plantations have yet to see the benefits of India’s entry into the “global” market. Though I craved more of this closing story, I found *Empire’s Garden* to be a rich brew, steeped in sharp investigations of colonial Assam, its gardens, migrations, and the desires of its elites to be included in “modern” India.

— Sarah Besky, University of Michigan

The Life of Cheese: Creating Food and Value in America

Heather Paxson

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013 332 pp.

Illustrations. \$29.95 (paper)

Before me on a wooden board is a piece of Humboldt Fog, an artisanal goat’s milk cheese of great complexity made by Cypress Grove, a small-scale producer in Arcata, California. It costs quite a bit, by cheese standards, and conveys layers of different flavors and sensations, from firm rubbery rind to runny, gamey exterior to a chalky interior reminiscent of a conventional chevre. But, as Heather Paxson explains in her original and skillful study, *The Life of Cheese*, we can understand the value of a contemporary artisanal cheese like this one only by examining the site of its production. On farms and in cheesemaking rooms and cheese-aging caves, we find forms of worth beyond exchange-value and the pleasures of eating. Her book is based on extensive ethnographic research among cheesemakers, especially in Vermont and Northern California, including time spent assisting in the cheesemaking process. It also draws on surveys that yield important data about what it means, economically speaking, to commit one’s life to hand-crafting cheese. Paxson introduces us to many types of cheesemakers, including third-generation dairy farmers, highly educated exurbanites, cows, goats, and sheep with distinct personalities and, of course, those crucial animal workers, the microorganisms that make cheese possible. In *The Life of Cheese*, we encounter artisanal cheeses like Humboldt Fog in many guises: as forms of biotechnology, works of handcraft, tastes of *terroir*, markers of what Pierre Bourdieu famously termed “distinction,” and, of course, as commodities, but of a special type.

At the heart of this ethnography of objects and their makers is the notion that artisanal cheese is an “unfinished commodity.” Unlike factory-produced “commodity cheddar” (which, Paxson points out, was priced like pork bellies and

other commodity foods on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange in 1997), such a commodity “has not yet been reduced to an apparent equivalence between intrinsic value and market value,” whereas a “finished” food commodity is one whose origins are obscured and forgotten to the point where the physical object itself seems to be the valuable thing (producing what Marx termed the “commodity fetish”) artisanal cheese celebrates its origins. Producers show up at farmer’s markets in urban areas near their farms and take pleasure in discussing the craft of cheese with those who buy it. And the very high price that some artisanal cheeses command may be understood, by some, as an investment in a form of production, indeed, a way of life, that runs against industrial agribusiness. Paxson argues that such “unfinished commodities” offer their makers a kind of ethical project through which they define their own values. Such an “open promise” is what entices many to give up more lucrative and secure forms of employment, take out enormous loans, and exhaust their savings (p.13). Not all artisanal cheesemakers entertain neo-agrarian fantasies, or desire to resist industrial agribusiness, but they all seem to find forms of value in handcrafting cheese that they could find in no other practice.

One of the most valuable dimensions of Paxson’s book is her inquiry into the category of handcraft, an important form of *habitus* in late twentieth and early twenty-first century America. Making artisanal cheese resembles making handcrafted furniture in the age of Ikea, making virtues of irregularity and uniqueness in a world of identical objects. But making cheese by hand is also a form of knowing about life, a form which involves all the senses, requires practiced subjective judgment and objective scientific knowledge, and calls each of those ways of knowing into question throughout the tasks of taking milk temperatures, adding cultures to milk, molding cheese, and making sure that only the right molds (i.e., microbial cultures) make it into the room where the cheese is worked. Craft is also science. Paxson’s research points to the idea (stated more implicitly than explicitly, here) that life itself looks different when we work its various physical manifestations with our hands. Of course, the cheesemakers whom Paxson studies are effectively crafting their own lives as they struggle to make an artisanal practice financially self-sustaining.

Making artisanal cheese is slow, comparatively unprofitable, and messy, as Paxson knows. No Thoreau-like romanticism here. Nor does Paxson ignore the issues that complicate attempts to position artisanal cheese making as a form of resistance against big agribusiness, its economies of scale, and its habitual understanding of food as commodity. If “finished” commodities can be fetishized, so can the work of our hands.

And in a world in which it costs more to make things by hand than by machine, handcraft and the irregularity and uniqueness it produces is often fetishized by those can afford to do so. Artisanal cheeses are expensive and, like so much of the infrastructure of contemporary “foodie” life, out of reach for many consumers. Forty-dollar-per-pound parmigiano reggiano produces its own special cognitive dissonance. Paxson notes these problems of access, but her book allows us to find a rich territory beyond them. If our continued debates about the exclusivity and elitism of Slow Food and the local and organic food movements are necessary, knowing that artisanal foods are about more than the narrow issues of distinction, class, and rank is—in a pun *The Life of Cheese* makes too tempting to pass up—“vitality” necessary.

—Benjamin Aldes Wurgaff

Turning the Tables: Restaurants and the Rise of the American Middle Class, 1880–1920

Andrew P. Haley

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013 xiv + 356 pp. Illustrations. \$27.95 (paper)

In *Turning the Tables*, historian Andrew Haley marshals vast primary research to offer a detailed account of the rise of middle-class dining in America that I find absolutely convincing. At the same time, he frames his sharp archival scholarship within a broader theoretical argument about social class and the impact of specific class practices (in this case, dining) on class identity overall. Here, respectfully, I would suggest that his rich, concrete research does not necessarily entail the overall interpretation he makes of his data.

Certainly, with regards to the specific historical practices he studies, Haley’s narrative feels quite right. Trenchantly, Haley chronicles how the Gilded Age elite used fine dining, often ostentatiously, to posit their social and cultural distinctiveness. Central to this project of status demarcation was French-inspired gastronomy, where any number of concerted tactics from menus fully written in French to snooty waiters to pricey systems of tipping and so on worked to wall off the economically privileged from the hoi polloi and posit a seeming superiority for the former over the latter.

But in a process at once economic (for instance, a boom in hotel construction that needed more customers to fill up cavernous restaurants) as well as cultural (the expansion, for example, of leisure time for white collar workers, which meant more time out on the town and more demand for respectable dining opportunities) and political (such as