

Graduate Association for **Food Studies**

Title: Book Review of *Secrets from the Greek Kitchen: Cooking, Skill, and Everyday Life on an Aegean Island*

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If the journey from cow to glass is the core narrative of *Pure and Modern Milk*, it also serves as a carrier for a larger story. Just as the relationship at the center of this book reflects general twentieth century concerns, so does milk's passage along the supply chain serve to illustrate the evolving journey of commercialism after 1900. Smith-Howard's analysis of the constant intersection between the changing dairy industry and the juggernaut of commercialism, which gained radically increased traction over the period, is well buttressed with specific examples: how the war impacted the marketing and sales of skim milk (76), and how the rise of supermarket shopping prompted manufacturers to opt for packaging designed to induce impulse buys (81). Accordingly, *Pure and Modern Milk* is attentive to points of contact between dairy production and neighboring industries, recounting, to cite one example, how casein was used to manufacture products that ranged from paper to high fashion items (72-5). If there is a flaw in the book, it is perhaps that these broader contexts might have sometimes been made more explicit; *Pure and Modern Milk*'s well-applied methodology and deftness of thought makes for a text that might easily have resonance beyond environmental history and indeed beyond food studies, and Smith-Howard could justifiably have been more ambitious in stating her work's implications at certain points. Nevertheless, this is a minor point compared to what has been included, and the interested reader will have little trouble spotting the parallels between Smith-Howard's observations and their own fields. As the epilogue makes evident, *Pure and Modern Milk* has much to offer in terms of informing investigations into marketing and consumer habits, including contemporary ones. This is, ultimately, the book's gift: a reminder of the complex social and economic depths that lie beneath the visible surface of food production.

¹ See *Material Powers: Cultural Studies, History and the Material Turn*, ed. Tony Bennett, Patrick Joyce (London: Routledge, 2010), 7.

BOOK REVIEW | MARCIA CARABELLO

Secrets from the Greek Kitchen: Cooking, Skill, and Everyday Life on an Aegean Island *David E. Sutton*

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014. 256 pp.

At a time when modern society is said to have left the kitchen for the couch,¹ David Sutton's latest book, *Secrets from the Greek Kitchen*, brings welcome empirical and theoretical depth previously lacking from the home cooking discourse. Through his fine grained ethnographic account, supplemented by video footage available online, Sutton provides a truly immersive look at the everyday cooking practices of Kalymnian islanders. This innovative application of visual ethnography lends dimensionality to Sutton's text, and provides an "argument for what is revealed about cooking when one starts from a more complex and contextual understanding of what ordinary people have been doing in kitchens" (5). Sutton's work shows that cooking, while perhaps a practice in transition, is still very much "bound up in the world" of all Kalymnians—young and old, female and male (182).

The book, divided into six thematic chapters, explores everyday kitchen activities on this Aegean island with the purpose of teasing out "the ways that cooking is transmitted, reproduced, and transformed among several generations of Kalymnian cooks" (3). Shifting focus from the general (e.g., theories of skill and knowledge transmission, the gendered and generational propriety of cooking practice, discussion of recipes and cooking shows) to the specific (e.g., cutting ingredients in the hand and other kitchen "micropractices," the kitchen choreography of mother and daughter, instances of continuity and change in familial practice), Sutton crafts a balanced and meaningful text that expertly navigates the central tension of any good ethnographic work: paying due tribute to participants' lived experiences while also presenting an argument resonant to a broader audience of food and culture scholars.

In the first chapter, "Emplacing Cooking,"

Sutton introduces readers to the geography and demography at the heart of his text. An island in the Dodecanese chain just off the coast of Turkey, Kalymnos has served as Sutton's fieldsite for more than two decades. In his previous work,² the author explored the role of food memories in creating and maintaining individual and collective identities, yet it was not until this latest work that he realized that cooking itself is in many ways a "memory process" (9). Starting in 2005 and returning yearly since, Sutton has pursued this new insight through open ended interviews, videotaped kitchen visits, and immersed participant observation on the island. His efforts offer a deep and nuanced understanding of the role cooking plays in the flow of everyday Kalymnian life. In this first chapter, Sutton reveals how the provisioning and preparation of food are socially embedded practices (36), serving as unifying threads in the fabric of Kalymnian society. On the island of Kalymnos, and arguably numerous other locales, cooking decisions are deeply entrenched in systems of value (41) and are bound up with myriad social concerns and moral considerations, not to mention more individualized ideas about health and finances.

Having established this contextual frame of value and meaning from which to further explore Kalymnian kitchen activities, Sutton's second chapter shifts focus to the active everyday use of kitchen tools as windows into broader patterns of life on the island. Through both text and video, Sutton presents a montage of three generations of Greek women cutting ingredients (potatoes, onion, zucchini) in the hand with small paring knives, rather than on the fixed surface of a cutting board. Sutton points out that while classically trained chefs would be appalled by the time and precision sacrificed, not to mention the risk assumed, by the practice of cutting ingredients in hand, it remains the predominant cutlery practice on the island because it is *socially* efficient (53-4). In having their attention freed from the surface of a cutting board, Kalymnian cooks are permitted to converse and engage with those passing in and out of their kitchens. The impact of this point is greatly strengthened by the unique experience afforded by Sutton's strategically referenced video clips, allowing reader to become viewer.

In chapters three, four, and six, Sutton closely follows the practices of another subset of participants to further contextualize his understandings of how Kalymnian women negotiate individual and collective tastes each time a meal is prepared and consumed. From the specificity of these individual choices and actions, Sutton demonstrates the importance of broader cultural contexts in understanding the significance and complexity of the everyday and habitual tasks of cooking practice. This reveals one of the book's most well kept secrets: the broad and empirically supported revelation that while the value considerations occupying the collective consciousness of Greek and American cooks may be similar (e.g., health, tradition, time pressures), the way they are acted upon is contingent on the cooking landscape in question (181). The intrigue of this point, however, actually marks one of the weaker points of Sutton's text. It seems a missed opportunity that the author did not further interrogate how such an intercultural revelation could apply intraculturally as well, providing a lens from which to make sense of the variations in cooking skill, knowledge, and practices from household to household, and not just country to country.

Nevertheless, food scholars seeking a contemporary discussion that diverges from the somewhat pessimistic stance that cooking as an everyday practice is bound for extinction will find much solace in *Secrets from the Greek Kitchen*. Sutton's book, impeccably researched and lucidly presented, complicates and challenges this widespread view while also providing the tools and guideposts needed to re-think what it means to cook and the myriad reasons why it matters—in Kalymnos and elsewhere. Since the author gives the last word in his book to one of his informants, here are Sutton's own in conclusion: "...cooking is an everyday, significant practice that generates so much discourse precisely because it matters" (182).

¹ Pollan, Michael. 2009. "Out of the Kitchen, Onto the Couch." *The New York Times Magazine*, August 2.

² Sutton, David E. *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory*. New York: Berg, 2001.