

Graduate Association for **Food Studies**

Title: Review of “Sugar & Spice: Grocers and Groceries in Provincial England, 1650-1830”
by Jon Stobart

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Eggo waffles, which was of nearly hyperbolic concern to consumers at the time, to demonstrate that despite industrial food's vulnerabilities, excesses, and problems, it "is still very much a part of not only American eating but also American culture" (67).

In Chapter 5, Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson examines the boundaries constructed to divide eating in and out—between insiders and intruders, tradition and innovation, the simple and the fancy, the quotidian and the spectacular. In her study of eating out, she argues that a globalized world so blurs the distinctions between private and public that the meaning of eating out becomes "manifestly variable" and "perceptibly unstable" (113). She concludes, "In the twenty-first century, more than ever, dining out will be about producing difference" in order to ensure the survival of restaurants within a competitive culinary environment (125). In Chapters 6 and 7, Amy Trubek and Alice Julier also explore how all aspects of cooking and eating, in spaces marked both private and public, are intricately linked to the structures of the broader, global food system. In her study of kitchen work, Trubek explores the fluidity of culinary practices, demonstrating how the twentieth century's social transformations altered the location, hierarchical arrangement, social prestige, and affective character of paid kitchen labor. Within this constantly shifting context, Julier addresses family and domesticity, arguing, "In contemporary times, the family meal has become the locus of concern for food and for social and political development" (163). It is at the dinner table, both real and imagined, that the global systems determining what and how consumers eat collide with social ideals of family (particularly those enacted by women and mothers) and nostalgic feelings for "a mythic agrarian past" (147).

In Chapter 8, "Body and Soul," Warren Belasco also explores this conflict, characterizing the act of eating as one in which eaters eternally aspire "to reconcile the material demands of the body with the noble longings of the soul" (182). This process of reconciliation grew more pronounced, moralized, complicated, and elusive during the modern era, as advancements in science, global linkages, and consumer cultures "also broadened people's awareness of connections and consequences" (179). In Chapter 10, "World Developments," Fabio Parasecoli explores these connections and consequences "at the margins of Western modernity," working to decentralize and contextualize the text's dominant focus upon the United States and Europe as well as to provide inspiration for further research (ix).

In her study of food media and representations in Chapter 9, Signe Rousseau offers perhaps the most

optimistic account of food in the modern era, gesturing to its continuity over time. Citing scientific literature, food porn, fine art, magazines, and television programs, she argues, "People will continue to tell stories about—and through—food, because it is a natural conduit for thinking about and negotiating life" (200). In this way, Rosseau points to the achievement of this text and series. Despite past moments when the academy shunned food as a topic unworthy of serious inquiry, this series dedicated to the cultural history of food is now not only possible but demonstrative, enlightening, and cohesive. This volume singularly contributes valuable insights to the study of food and global history. *A Cultural History of Food in the Modern Age* provides a thorough, varied, and dynamic history of food during our most recent century and is sure to engage scholars and students alike.

Bibliography

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BOOK REVIEW | KIMI CERIDON

Sugar & Spice: Grocers and Groceries in Provincial England, 1650–1830 Jon Stobart

Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2012. 304 pp.

Jon Stobart persuasively shows that daily purchasing habits, procurement techniques, and modern retailing practices date as far back as long seventeenth century in *Sugar & Spice: Grocers and Groceries in Provincial England*. Beginning in the late seventeenth century, he examines systems of flexible procurement and selling practices that led to adaptive retailing techniques for acquiring and selling newly available products such as spices, sugar, tea, coffee, and tobacco. Widespread availability meant these new goods were enjoyed not only by the gentry and elite: the middling and lower classes could purchase these specialty items at a variety of shopkeepers, such as apothecaries, drapers and metalsmiths. *Sugar & Spice* shows that by developing a complex supply network and by cultivating their personalized selling practices, grocers differentiated themselves from other retailers to become the most trusted sellers of these items. Through the examination of particular

grocers' sales records and the purchasing habits of corresponding consumers, Stobart takes a localized view to discuss the everyday consumption habits of individuals. By focusing on the practices of individuals within global trade, Stobart effectively reminds us the global is constituted and influenced by individual consumers and sellers.

Stobart uses a social history approach to examine individuals within the global system. He draws on geographical trends, descriptions, and illustrations of selling spaces, advertising and handbill materials, estate inventories, tax accounts, store receipts, grocer credit records and correspondences, and recipe books to examine day-to-day shopping interactions. Unlike Mui and Mui who, in *Shops and Shopkeepers of Eighteenth-Century England*, argue new products suddenly revolutionized retailing, Stobart pieces together a more nuanced picture in which shopkeepers used customized and flexible techniques to hone their trade over time.

Sellers and consumers cultivated relationships through trust, quality, authenticity, and personal reputation. Advertising media and trade-cards used provenance and imagery to further enforce these qualities. Such imagery from the eighteenth century endures in contemporary tea packaging through graphics of pagodas and Chinese figures. To establish trust, grocers created welcoming environments, with parlors for polite socialization and displays of goods for ready inspection.

Unlike historian Jan de Vries's market-based economic perspective in *The Industrious Revolution*, Stobart zooms in and examines habits of grocers and households. He argues that treating eighteenth-century purchasing behaviors as driven by novelty and imitation results in a caricature of the consumer as a mindless, homogeneous group with no agency. He dismisses this caricature by creating a portrait of the consumer as a person making daily consumptive decisions based on his or her individual needs, desires, and ability to define identity. As such, Stobart treats consumers and grocers as individuals and recognizes the importance of individual actions in building a global economy. Stobart does not dismiss the notions of novelty and imitation but rather argues they are only part of more complex motivations behind consumer behavior.

Stobart uses store records and advertising to support the assertion that individuals made grocery-shopping decisions based on day-to-day circumstances rather than due to a constant pursuit of novelty and imitation. Sometimes and for some individuals, this meant habitual purchasing. For others, purchases were made in response to the state of household supplies. Yet others made erratic

and often chaotic purchases likely based on instantaneous needs. People did not purchase groceries on a whim, swayed by fashion. Rather, most consumers visited their grocer with intent, planning purchases prior to shopping. Grocery shopping emerged as a process of addressing needs, comfort, individual preference, economy, and availability rather than as a process for creating and cultivating market distinction.

Stobart recognizes that the novelty of new groceries (tea, for example) eventually wore off, and new consumer patterns and habits emerged to maintain the demand. From a close examination of credit records, he shows that lower-class customers regularly purchased lower grades of tea and infrequently purchased higher grades of tea, indicating not purchasing patterns driven by imitation but rather purchases expressing preference, affordability, and occasion. The most telling piece of evidence Stobart discusses is an overseer's accounts of the St. John's workhouse. Here supposed luxuries such as treacle, tea, and tobacco are purchased for inmates. Since most inmates were not in the position to imitate the elite, purchases indicate these goods were part of ordinary day-to-day life and offered as comforts.

While Stobart demonstrates grocers and consumers exerted agency in defining their trade and consumption according to individual preferences, he does so with evidence from small geographic areas of England. He draws conclusions from evidence that is disparate in both time and location. For example, he compares the purchasing habits of one grocer in the early eighteenth century to those of a grocer in the late eighteenth century to show two grocers acting according to needs specific to a time and location. Such limited comparisons could constitute either a trend or an anomaly.

The same may be said of establishing temporal and spatial conclusions about consumption based on the limited availability of recipe books and estate inventories. The close examination of print advertising and the credit accounts of multiple grocers provides cohesion in the narrative, but it is unclear how larger socioeconomic forces exerted pressure on the behaviors of grocers and consumers. In this sense, Stobart struggles to balance the local perspective with the global perspectives. An analysis encompassing all of England may not be sufficiently local to sharpen this contrast. Despite the limitations of available evidence, however, Stobart does effectively show that eighteenth-century consumers were purchasing groceries due less to trendiness and more to individual circumstances. If anything, *Sugar & Spice* demonstrates the need for more

localized social histories that examine the roles individuals play in global trade.

Overall, Stobart provides a compelling case for treating eighteenth-century grocery purchases as driven by individual and personal choices rather than solely emulation. As a social history tracing the development of eighteenth-century retailing, *Sugar & Spice* successfully localizes and, thus, examines eighteenth-century global trade on an individual level. While global economics indicate increasing consumption of new goods like spices, sugar, tea, coffee, and tobacco, Stobart presents a compelling case for examining the local influences of individual consumers and sellers.

BOOK REVIEW | ARIEL KNOEBEL

The Untold History of Ramen: How Political Crisis in Japan Spawned a Global Food Craze George Solt

University of California Press. 2014. 222 pp.

George Solt's ample narrative of the history of Japan's beloved national food traces ramen from its origins as the calorie-rich sustenance of Chinese immigrants and manual laborers to a fashionable worldwide craze. Solt begins his introduction with a comprehensive definition of ramen, paying respect to the variety of styles and regional characteristics, and moves on to discuss the ubiquity of ramen and the extensive documentation of its consumption in Japanese cultural texts. He speaks of ramen not simply as an evolving dish but as a lens to discuss food, labor, and Japan's changing national identity. Solt traces the cultural history of Japan through ramen's changing representations in popular culture but deliberately avoids examining ramen as a fetish food. Instead, he examines issues of global trade during Cold War and Japanese national identity.

Any reader can see through Solt's record that ramen is a dish worthy of its own narrative: It evolved from Shina soba, originally associated with manual labor, poverty, and Chinese immigrant identity, into a Japanese cultural export to cosmopolitan crowds across the globe. Solt uses the first three chapters to trace the dish's history. In the late nineteenth century, European imperialism directed cultural changes in Japan while migrant Chinese workers brought their food traditions to the quickly industrializing country.

Chapter 2 uses a well-researched analysis of declassified US government documents to discuss Cold War food rationing and the shortages in wheat and meat that caused the effective elimination of ramen from the Japanese diet. Chapter 3 changes focus to discuss instant ramen marketing and technology in Japan and examines many of the implications of ramen's popularity on both Japanese and American culture.

Chapters 4 and 5 follow the transformation of ramen into a Japanese national food and a globally iconic dish. One of the most remarkable parts of the story of ramen is the dish's staying power as a Japanese cultural staple and its ability to transform into a globally regarded culinary masterpiece. Solt places the Japanese Raumen Museum at the forefront of his analysis here, going into great depth about its creation and contents. He then expands his scope to the international scene, in which ramen has risen to popularity in recent years. In his final analysis of ramen's place in today's food world, Solt examines the continuing artistry and commitment to excellence of many ramen chefs but misses an opportunity to examine the social implications of the most recent ramen crazes outside of Japan from a consumer level.

This first section of the book feels rife with digressions and cultural analyses that lack strong context or connection to Solt's main argument. He offers strong descriptions of specific case studies—the Raumen Museum, the Nissin corporation, and popular movies and books—but provides few tie-ins to his central argument. These important pieces of evidence, which could have strengthened the thesis of the book, instead just feel like digressive stories with frail relation to the central theme. By contrast, the stronger second section includes much more appropriate readings of cultural artifacts, which relate to the main argument in a significantly more compelling way. Here, Solt describes the transformation of ramen into a fashionable object worthy of specialty shops and subcultures across the world.

Although Solt makes a compelling argument regarding the cultural relevance of ramen both in a historical and modern context, large portions of the book feel unaligned with the central point. Solt's work could have been divided into three separate books: a discussion of the historical cultural and labor changes in Japan through representations of ramen in popular culture, a comprehensive look at food rationing in Asia during the Cold War (when ramen was essentially removed from the menu), and a history of the instant ramen industry in Japan and the world. Solt's lengthy discussion of food rationing takes up a large portion of the book's content, causing the reader to miss