Title: Review of “Commensality: From Everyday Food to Feast” edited by Susanne Kerner, Cynthia Chou, and Morten Warmind
Author(s): Jesse Dart
Source: Graduate Journal of Food Studies, Vol. 3, No. 1, (Sep. 2016), pp.69-70
Published by: Graduate Association for Food Studies

©Copyright 2016 by the Graduate Association for Food Studies. The GAFS is a graduate student association that helps students doing food-related work publish and gain professionalization. For more information about the GAFS, please see our website at https://gradfoodstudies.org/.
Eating together is a powerful act, but what is it that brings people together around the table? Commensality: From Everyday Food to Feast gives readers a look at commensality from the perspectives of anthropology, sociology, archaeology, and historical research. Each method contributes something distinct to the investigation. Researchers examine commensality from the past to the present to understand the diverse and enduring nature of eating together. The articles in this edited volume were gathered from a conference in 2011 at the University of Copenhagen’s Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies (ToRS). Researchers seeking an introduction to commensality from multiple perspectives will find it interesting, although those with more knowledge and experience in the field will find it too general.

Broadly, the book covers cultural aspects of commensality, as defined by eating and drinking together in common physical or social settings. The authors take diverse perspectives on commensality, not only through differing methodologies but also through geographic scope. Articles focus on the United States, China, Bolivia, Turkey, and the near East, with critical reflections that are part of a larger ongoing dialogue about commensality. The book is divided into three parts, each giving special attention to one aspect of the study of commensality: everyday commensality, special commensality, and the social and political aspects of commensality.

The first part of the book focuses on “everyday commensality and the fundamental social importance of including and excluding members of a society to reinforce important relationships” (4). Within this section, Yvonne le Grand investigates activism and commensality in Portugal through an engaging look into the world of a temporary vegan zone. Vegans and vegetarians in countries where eating meat is the norm offer a look at how outsiders build a social and commensal community through shared meals and activism. The article shows that an alternative vegan diet can be used as a political strategy to counter the global corporate food system, a very timely topic.

Part two covers “different forms of special commensality, spanning from identifying elements of commensality in archaeological contexts to specific examples of medieval banquets” (6). Katheryn C. Twiss presents three core pieces of knowledge necessary to understand and practice the archaeology of food. Different data sets have distinct relationships to human society, context, and sample character, so truly integrating multiple data sets remains a challenge. These ideas are supported in the chapter by examples that she has experienced, but as she mentions, the full scope is beyond the length of the chapter.

Paul Freedman’s chapter on hierarchy and excess in historical concepts of banqueting is a fascinating, if brief, look at gregarious feasting and a very useful reflection on the continued use of hierarchy at the dining table. Expanding on the work of Norbert Elias about the civilizing process, etiquette, and manners in courts of the past, Freedman foresees a “fading of a certain kind of splendid commensality” (108). While this is true in many respects, it fails to account for new forms of lavish spending at Michelin-starred restaurants, corporate dinners, and the concept of commensality as part of a business transaction, where lavish meals are part of larger social and economic relationships.

The final section of the book discusses the role of commensality in identity formation and its role as a social and political tool. Cynthia Chou’s chapter on iconic dishes as part of a national identity in a non-religious context is a great starting point for research, not just in this chapter, but also in the overall scheme of the book. Chou closely examines Singapore, a country that has a mix of culinary influences. To her, chicken rice is the one dish that has the ability to express a sense of national identity for the country. Culinary influences have brought a number of ways of cooking and dishes to Singapore, chicken rice being one of those, but Chou does not address how chicken rice fits into the concept of a national cuisine, if at all.

Sidney Mintz’s book Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom discusses at length the concept of cuisine and the lack of cuisine in some countries. Like Chou, Mintz believes that iconic foods exist, but that some countries lack a national cuisine—the best example is the United States, where there is a large mix of ethnic influences, but no definite national cuisine (as for example, in Japan or Italy). Iconic dishes are well worth understanding in a wider framework, though, perhaps through the concept of cultural intimacy. Chou’s investigation provides some of the necessary groundwork for further study in this area.
The editors argue that commensal acts are essential for the integration of a society and that commensality is undeniably one of the most important articulations of human sociality. To some degree, this book is successful in its aim, but it perhaps lacks some depth and development. Its aim is broad and sweeping, and the articles cover just a few examples and could use more developed arguments.

The book does a nice job of giving a basic overview of the ideas about commensality and methods used to study it in the social sciences and the humanities. One thing this study of commensality lacks is a look at dining alone—the opposite of commensality. With such an intense focus on eating together, there must be some modern repercussions for eating alone, and perhaps including this type of research could temper the goals of the book overall. Commensality studies could be advanced with a consideration of what happens with the commensal unit falls apart or when people are forced or choose to eat alone. Apart from this shortfall, this introduction to commensality is useful for those who have a basic understanding of food studies and would be particularly useful for students and academics in the social sciences who seek a broad view of commensality. Those with more advanced knowledge might find the articles lacking in depth. Overall, this volume shows us just how vast the study of commensality is and how it continues to fascinate researchers from various fields around the world.

BOOK REVIEW | ANASTASIA DAY

Sowing the Seeds of Victory: American Gardening Programs of World War I
Rose Hayden-Smith


Rose Hayden-Smith’s inaugural book, Sowing the Seeds of Victory, contextualizes the World War I war garden efforts within various progressive reform agendas and situates home front gardens as crucial models for localized, nutrition-oriented food movements for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Hayden-Smith argues that production of material food was secondary to the production of intangible social goods that reformers hoped to harvest from the soil: Americanization, women’s rights, a modernized American civic realm, urban beautification, public health, and more. The particular focus of these efforts, in Hayden-Smith’s telling, was children and youth; there, reformers hoped, was the most fertile ground for growing social change.

Hayden-Smith studies two national gardening programs: the National War Garden Commission (NWGC), responsible for the iconic community and backyard gardens, and the United States’ School Garden Army (USSGA), which operated primarily within the public school system. She also examines the Women’s Land Army, which funneled women workers to understaffed farming operations. Her final institution of interest is the Pennsylvania School of Horticulture for Women, a pioneering center for academic research oriented toward female empowerment and employment in the agricultural sector. Additionally, Hayden-Smith examines the role visual imagery and propaganda played in all of these efforts. The final chapter discusses the impact of the World War I gardening ethos on American food systems into the interwar period and especially on the World War II food front; a prescriptive epilogue follows.

One of the strongest points of Hayden-Smith’s historical analysis is her argument about historical memory. She hypothesizes that gardens were put to the service of self-consciously modern, Progressive Era goals, but the imagery surrounding gardens often drew upon America’s past. While the prominence of gardening as a civic, patriotic, and uplifting activity was new, it was shrouded in stories of America’s productionist past and peopled with images of yeoman farmers and founding fathers. Gardening advocates saw no tension between the backward-looking lens of garden propaganda and the unprecedented expansion of the regulatory state, the growing role of corporations in public life and celebrations of industrial, urban modernity. These gardens looked both backward to a simpler past and sought to build a modern citizenry and a progressive nation for the future.

Sowing the Seeds of Victory casts a wide and compelling historiographic net, illustrating the connection between war gardens and environmental history; women’s history, political history, history of consumption, agricultural history, history of health/nutrition, and progressive ideology. It joins a recent wave of books from other scholars interested in food and war on American home fronts, including Cecelia Gowdy-Wygant’s Cultivating Victory, a gender-based analysis of America farms and gardens during both World Wars, and Amy Bentley’s Eating for Victory, an earlier book on World War II food and the politics of domesticity. Hayden-Smith’s ambitions are broader than either of these antecedent texts; rather than choose any one analytic lens, she seeks to firmly embed gardens within the mainstream progressive social and political currents that characterize the early American twentieth century.