Title: Review of “Word of Mouth: What We Talk About When We Talk About Food” by Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson

Author(s): Hailey Grohman

Source: Graduate Journal of Food Studies, Vol. 3, No. 1, (Sep. 2016), pp.72-73

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/.
a serious threat to Iraqi food security and served as a severe warning for surrounding Arab countries.

Part two focuses on the Gulf’s global interactions in relation to food security. Moving outside the Gulf region, chapter five discusses Arab investment in farmland in Africa and Asia, despite various potential setbacks like Chinese and Western investors competing for the same land, global climate change, ecological degradation, population growth, and potential conflicts with local stakeholders. Honing into a specific context, chapter six analyzes the failed 1970s attempt to make Sudan the Gulf’s personal breadbasket. Despite this, history seems to be repeating itself with new calls for land investments into Sudan in response to the 2008 global food crisis and potentially the announcements of a government-sponsored dam project and “agricultural revival” program in the 2000s. In addition to Sudan, Woertz also examines land investments in Ethiopia, Pakistan, and the Philippines, despite these countries’ inability to provide enough food for their own citizens, in chapter seven. Investments from Saudi Arabia and Qatar are emphasized due to their institutionalized agro-investment policies, which are frequently implemented through sovereign wealth funds. Moving from publicity to reality, chapter eight focuses on the discrepancy between ambitious announcements of agricultural land investments throughout the world compared to relatively modest action on the ground. This is largely due to the difficulty of working in underdeveloped nations, ecological constraints, and a general resistance from local grassroots organizations despite upper-level government officials’ desire for foreign investment projects. In order for the Gulf countries to ensure food security in the future, Woertz argues in chapter nine that Gulf countries must diversify their economies. Woertz recognizes that self-sufficiency based on domestic agriculture is impossible in the Gulf due to low water levels. Domestic policies should be instituted to maintain water levels, curb overconsumption, and stretch the life of oil reserves, in order to be able to pay for imported food over the long run.

This book adds to the dearth of food-focused books about the Middle East. It does an excellent job of connecting disparate strains of political and economic policies, organizations, and actions into a coherent narrative. Despite the book’s focus on larger government-instituted policies, it does not fail to recognize the importance of more local desires of people near and on agro-investment lands in developing countries. The book also provides valuable insight into the historical and psychological reasons for a fear of food insecurity in the Gulf. However, some readers might be overwhelmed by the sheer number of details provided. A wide variety of students and scholars would find this book to be interesting and useful for their studies, but it would be most useful for policymakers, graduate students, and faculty seeking to understand food security in the Gulf. This book is also important for any scholar in food studies or social sciences interested in food security, land grabs, historical examples of food as political weapon, and geopolitical aspects of food sovereignty.

**BOOK REVIEW | HAILEY GROHMAN**

*Word of Mouth: What We Talk About When We Talk About Food*

Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson


Describing a food chain as “farm to fork” may miss a crucial link: post-meal conversation. In *Word of Mouth*, Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson assesses this gap in the food studies literature by examining the rhetoric of food, that which comes out of our mouths rather than in. Drawing on varied secondary sources as well as her own previous research on world-class chefs, Ferguson illustrates how “food talk” both informs and reflects the ways that cultures understand food. In three parts, she leads the reader to an understanding of the close relationship between food discourse of all kinds and the lived food experience.

Ferguson’s sociological background leads her to situate her data firmly within a social and historical context. She gives equal analytical weight to the venerable and the quotidian, the haute menu and the comic strip. Guiding her methodology is cultural critic Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project*, an unconventional history of Paris told through texts of all types. In Ferguson’s adaptation of this method, culinary sources from cookbooks to New Yorker cartoons share a stage. This assortment of cultural miscellany, which she dubs “methodological eclecticism,” guides a larger narrative of the history of hosting and dining, cooking and chefing, eating and talking (xviii). Throughout, Ferguson sees a changing culinary landscape—one becoming less formal and more global—and shows how this landscape is reflected by the discourse around it.

The book is divided into three discrete sections, brought together by an epilogue centered around the Pixar film *Ratatouille*. Part one introduces food texts that
reveal historical patterns in the U.S. and France: culinary nationalism, culinary individualism, and the tension between food safety and pleasure. It is in this section that Ferguson’s definition of food talk is the widest: she analyzes events, like the Nathan’s Hot Dog Eating Contest, alongside children’s stories like Winnie-the-Pooh. In these varied sources she emphasizes the difference between French and American food culture and, conversely, the unifying nature of those cultures within their contexts. “We do not share food,” she says, “we share the experience of food” (51).

Part two focuses on cooks and chefs and their representation within food media. Much of the food talk here comes from interviews with chefs from Ferguson’s previous research on culinary France, giving the term a more literal, and understandable, definition. Ferguson argues that cooks and chefs have taught America how to engage in food talk and gives spotlight to iconic chefs who have shaped the culinary imagination: Julia Child, Irma Rombauer, and modern tastemakers like Ferran Adrià of elBulli restaurant. She celebrates Rombauer in particular for her conversational writing style that brought joy to the experience of women cooking within budgetary and health constraints. She cites chapters in the Joy of Cooking that demonstrate Rombauer’s ebullient spirit: “Favors for Children’s Parties” and a chapter on cocktails in the midst of Prohibition.

Finally, part three illustrates food talk on the other side of the kitchen door, tracing the shift of the dining experience from “haute cuisine” to “haute food.” Haute food represents a restaurant culture that has become informalized, Ferguson argues, even as it continues to produce and reflect class status. This informalization, marked by a “loosening of the forms” that previously dictated the dining experience, brings a more democratic era in dining but does not eliminate disagreement (141). Food talk, from the menus of five star restaurants to the jargon used by restaurant industry members to describe and categorize patrons, is the primary mode of negotiation for the tensions between tradition and innovation, chefs and reviewers, and the evolving manifestations of conspicuous consumption.

A lack of previous research in the field of food rhetoric or food discourse allows Ferguson room to explore what she sees as being important or poignant, much like her methodological mentor Walter Benjamin. Her analysis of selected sources, though sometimes seeming to be chosen at random, showcases her skill in connecting food talk to its larger cultural and social contexts. Drawing on her previous research in France, nearly all of her selected texts come from French or American culinary history. These texts underline the differences in how those cultures’ cooking and eating patterns have evolved over the centuries as well as how those patterns have emerged through discourse. Narrowing her constraints to two countries allows Ferguson to delve deeper into the minutiae of her subjects, a task she does with verve and joy.

Ferguson takes her texts for what they are: snapshots of a culinary event or opinion, representative of a speaker at a certain point in time. She does not privilege one over another, but because of this, an exploration of power relationships or outside cultural factors is missing. She leaves this question from her prologue unanswered: “[W]hy is need surprisingly muted in discussions of what makes our contemporary food world so different from what it was not all that long ago?” (xxi) It may be that those who do not have enough to eat cannot participate in food talk, and this missing material goes unmentioned.

Despite this shortcoming, Ferguson pulls together an informative culinary history covering hundreds of years while using a diverse, though limited, collection of sources. Her analyses are insightful and serve to deftly weave together texts of all different types and genres, taking the reader along for the ride. Perhaps most importantly, Ferguson showcases just how far-reaching food talk really is, opening up for analysis source material traditionally eschewed by sociologists and anthropologists. This book is an excellent addition to the developing field of food media studies as well a unique expansion on the field of culinary history.

**BOOK REVIEW | JULIETA FLORES JURADO**

*The Culinary Imagination: From Myth to Modernity*

Sandra M. Gilbert


*The Culinary Imagination: From Myth to Modernity* is a book that has grown from Sandra M. Gilbert’s enduring interest in food and its representations, both as a scholar and as a poet. Known for her groundbreaking work *The Madwoman in the Attic* (co-authored with Susan Gubar), a feminist analysis of nineteenth-century women authors, Gilbert approaches the subject of Western culinary imagination with an eclectic methodology that combines art history, philosophy, anthropology, and literary criticism with