

Five Food Microhistories: Stories of What, How and Why We Eat

Cake: A Global History

By Nicola Humble

Reaktion Books, 144pp, \$24.95, 2010

ISBN 978 1 86189 648 3

Cheese: A Global History

By Andrew Dalby

Reaktion Books, 128pp, \$24.95, 2009

ISBN 978 1 86189 523 3

Tea: A Global History

By Helen Saberi

Reaktion Books, 184pp, \$24.95, 2010

ISBN 978 1 86189 776 3

Soup: A Global History

By Janet Clarkson

Reaktion Books, 152 pp, \$24.95, 2010

ISBN 978 1 86189 774 9

The Bloody History of the Croissant

By David Halliday

Arcadia (imprint of Australian Scholarly Publishing), 111pp, \$19.95, 2010

ISBN 9781921509865

Reviewed by Donna Lee Brien

In the 1990s, I discovered, and became highly enamoured of, the form of historical narrative known as microhistory. Microhistory's focus on single ordinary subjects including localities, events, lives, families or everyday products means that these studies can illuminate broader culture. This aspect of microhistory, together with its compelling narrative style, is attracting more and more readers. This interest is due, in part, to microhistorians' ability to fashion fascinating and even dramatic stories from data that can often appear uninspiring in its raw form.

In food history terms, there is nothing more ordinary than the everyday food ordinary people eat, and microhistorical studies of these unprepossessing subjects are popular, so much so that, at times, they are topping the bestseller lists. Books such as Mark Kurlansky's *Cod: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World* and Lizzie Collingham's *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors* have all reached sales figures that have surpassed many other historical texts. These, and other authors, have, moreover, described their books in terms that greatly surpass the significance of the single food item, with Kurlansky describing such food writing as 'about agriculture, about ecology, about man's relationship with nature, about the climate, about nation-building, cultural struggles, friends and enemies, alliances, wars, religion. It is about memory and tradition and, at times, even about sex' (*Choice Cuts* 1). Microhistories of single food items are published frequently today, and deal with some, many or all of the above topics. They also move beyond these topics to range into discussions of topics of personal interest such as diet and health, of social and cultural importance such as the media, and of global significance such as environmental sustainability and food security. The five books reviewed here are indicative of these current trends.

Soup: A Global History, *Cheese: A Global History*, *Cake: A Global History* and *Tea: A Global History* are from Reaktion Press's delectable Edible series. I have nothing but praise for the books that make up this wonderful series, each of which is quite different in scope and tone, but each of which contributes to a series of a consistently high standard. I am not alone in this assessment, with individual books praised highly in reviews and the series winning a special commendation in the prestigious 2010 André Simon Food and Drink Awards. The approach of each, as the subtitles suggest, moves outside a narrow Western focus and despite their concise length (all less than 200 pages), the information included is detailed and interesting, even for readers like myself who are familiar with other works on these topics. The writing is both scholarly and accessible, while the production of each book is nothing short of beautiful. Each is published in hardcover format, with the series marked by an elegant cream slipcover with coloured drawing. Each is lavishly illustrated throughout with high quality images that illustrate and enhance the text: *Cake* has 53 illustrations, 31 in colour; *Soup* has 60, 37 in colour; *Cheese* has 60, 40 in colour; while *Tea* has 77, with 62 of these in colour.

Each of these books reveals real passion for the subject from the author, all of whom reveal both personal and scholarly interest in the subject. *Cake: A Global History's* author, Nicola Humble, for instance, is Professor of English Literature at Roehampton University (UK), and author of an important book on British cookbooks, *Culinary Pleasures: Cook Books and the Transformation of British Food*, as well as books on women's cultures: *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s* and *Victorian Heroines: Representations of Femininity in Nineteenth-*

Century Literature and Art (the latter with Kimberley Reynolds). Humble begins her dissertation on cake with a personal memory (of her fifth year birthday cake—a train) which focuses the discussion to follow on how ‘Cakes are very strange things, producing a range of emotional responses far out of keeping with their culinary significance’ (8). This is followed by a fascinating discussion of the difference between cakes, bread and biscuits; cakes from around the world; a history of baking; rituals and symbolism associated with cakes; famous cakes in literature; and a chapter on postmodern cakes (which includes cupcakes and the representation of cakes in contemporary art). While I devoured this volume in one sitting, I returned to Humble’s thoughtful discussion of what makes a cake as opposed to other food items made from similar ingredients, and her detailed discussion of the place of baking in American culture. Her ideas on food in literature could easily be expanded into a volume of its own.

Based in France, Andrew Dalby is also well regarded in food history circles for his many books on culinary topics from the ancient world, including *Bacchus: A Biography*, *Flavours of Byzantium*, *Food in the Ancient World from A to Z*, and *Empire of Pleasures: Luxury and Indulgence in the Roman World*. His books have won prestigious awards with *Siren Feasts: A History of Food and Gastronomy in Greece* winning the Runciman Award, offered by the Anglo-Hellenic League for a work published in English dealing wholly or in part with Greece or Hellenism, and *Dangerous Tastes: The Story of Spices* named Food Book of the Year by the Guild of Food Writers. In *Cheese: A Global History*, Dalby brings this considerable erudition to his study, which he divides into a discussion of the various types of cheese and how their names have changed through time, as well as the history, making and consumption of cheese—all of which are tackled from a historical perspective. In terms of food security, Dalby explains how cheese was a way of transforming milk—a good but unstable source of protein—into a much more reliable food resource. His chapter on cheese making deals with continuity and variety in cheese making from the Cyclops in *The Odyssey* to modern times, discussing the various types of milk used (sheep, goat, cow, buffalo) and how it is curdled, treated, flavoured, aged and stored.

Like many today in the West, I use cheese largely as a simple food on its own or as a flavouring ingredient in such dishes as soups, pasta or salads, and was unaware until I read Dalby’s work how widely cheese has been used as a culinary ingredient throughout Western history, and especially appreciated this part of Dalby’s text. I also really enjoyed the series of historical recipes and was prompted to tackle some of them.

Helen Saberi, author of *Tea: A Global History*, also has a significant published profile in culinary history. She is the author of *Noshe Djan: Afghan Food and Cookery* and co-author with David Burnett of *The Road to Vindaloo: Curry Cooks and Curry Books*. She assisted the late, great Alan Davidson for many

years on his *Oxford Companion to Food* (as research director), and co-authored the microhistory, *Trifle*, and co-edited the compilation *The Wilder Shores of Gastronomy: Twenty Years of the Best Food Writing from the Journal Petits Propos Culinaires* with him. In *Tea*, after defining and describing various forms of tea, the world's second most popular beverage after water, Saberi follows tea's story geographically from China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan, to the Middle East and Mediterranean and hence to the West through India, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. Detailing the differences between white, yellow, green, oolong, black and puerh teas, Saberi also discusses the different grades of teas and provides a glossary of tasting terms that is just as detailed and descriptive as those used in tasting wine. Tea's rise and fall as exotic and costly beverage of high status to drink of the masses is traced, as are its traditional uses such as in the Japanese Zen tea ceremony. Modern teas, such the current fashion for Bubble tea and Chai in the West, and the market for organic, fair trade and origin-specific teas are not neglected, and herbal teas, which are not teas at all, are also defined and discussed. The meals that are centred around tea, such as morning, afternoon and high tea, are described, as are methods of preparation, including the invention and current high rates of use of tea bags. Australian billy tea gets a mention, as does ongoing medical research into tea's therapeutic properties. Like the other volumes in this series, Saberi manages to pack in a great deal of fascinating information, while paying attention to scholarly detail.

Food historian Janet Clarkson admits in the beginning of *Soup* that she panicked a little when she had committed to writing an entire book on soup, especially as soup—unlike many other food products—she finds, is not inherently sexy, extravagant, mysterious, exotic, cute or sporty. Yet, it is soup's very familiarity, universality and ubiquity that Clarkson finds as its 'claim to fame' (9). Clarkson, who lives in Queensland, and is author of numerous culinary encyclopedia entries as well as the books *Menus from History: Historic Meals and Recipes for Every Day of the Year* and *Pie: A Global History* in the Edible series, took a thematic approach to her study, beginning with the origins of soup, and then progressing to what she classified as medicinal (including a fascinating dissertation on soup as comfort food and its role as medicine), charitable (soup kitchens and the role soup has played in feeding those in need), portable (soups as preserved and concentrated foods for travel and what this has meant for the history of exploration and colonisation) and global soups. In the latter, Clarkson posits that 'Soup is unequivocally a human cultural phenomenon, not a geographic or political entity' (84). She finishes with a glorious chapter on noteworthy soups that details a series of extravagant (the soups of kings and other wealthy diners), aphrodisiac, unusual (cold and sweet soups), dangerous (poisoned) and even sad soups (as in the nineteenth-century mania for turtle soup), a list that certainly challenged my idea of soups' comfortable familiarity.

Each book in the Edible series includes a menu of choices for further reading on the topic—a list of references, select bibliography, and a number of relevant websites and associations. Other books in the series include *Caviar* by Nichola Fletcher, *Chocolate* by Sarah Moss and Alexander Badenoch, *Curry* by Colleen Taylor Sen, *Dates* by Nawal Nasrallah, *Hamburger* by Andrew F. Smith, *Hot Dog* by Bruce Kraig, *Ice Cream* by Laura B. Weiss, *Lobster* by Elisabeth Townsend, *Milk* by Hannah Velten, *Pancake* by Ken Albala, *Pie* by Janet Clarkson, *Pizza* by Carol Helstosky, *Potato* by Andrew F. Smith, *Sandwich* by Bee Wilson, *Spices* by Fred Czarra, and *Whiskey* by Kevin R. Kosar. I want to read all of these, and cannot recommend this series highly enough.

The Bloody History of the Croissant, David Halliday's first book, similarly takes an historical approach in tackling the topic of what he asserts is the world's most beloved pastry. The book is endorsed by two luminaries in the Australian food world, with a foreword by Neil Perry and a cover quote by Gabriel Gaté—both Perry and Gaté are celebrity chefs who have written popular cookbooks. Gaté found it a 'great little book ... very interesting and beautifully written', while Perry's first line mirrors my own first impression of this little volume, 'Who would have thought the Croissant would have such a rich history' (ix). Perry continues to express a sentiment which is at the heart of much current scholarship about food, 'Most often we know nothing of the history or the provenance of the food we eat ... the humble croissant ... has quite a story to tell ... I know when I take a bit of my next croissant that memories ... will flood back' (ix). I should give a spoiler alert here, but one of Halliday's contributions to this history is to discover and document that, despite common belief, the croissant is not a French product. Halliday traces the pastry's origins, outlining the use of the crescent shape in breads in ancient Greece and what this signified. To tell the pastry's story, he looks at this symbolism as well as how the croissant's history is closely tied to political and military conflict throughout European history. At less than a hundred pages in length, written in an accessible style and illustrated with line drawings, the book is clearly intended for a general readership. It is the kind of attractive little volume that one might pick up at the register attracted by the cover or choose as a gift for a foodie friend. Halliday nevertheless provides an (albeit brief) annotated bibliography, a list of further readings as well as summary information on the historical figures featured in his text and a three page timeline that ranges from ancient Sumeria to the popularity of the croissant in the 1920s and today.

Like many others who enjoy food history, I like not only reading about food, but am often inspired to cook from these volumes and Halliday's book would have been enriched for me if it had included instructions for both making croissants and recipes which use the pastries. I am thinking specifically here of Nigella Lawson's deliciously thrifty but decadent Caramel croissant pudding

from *Nigella Express*, which bakes stale croissants in a creamy egg and bourbon custard, but there are others that could have been referenced. In researching this review, I indeed attempted a number of the recipes from each of the Edible series volumes and found them clear and reliable. I was indeed able to construct an entire dinner party menu from them, and served a delicious meal of Watercress Soup and Damper (from *Soup*), Viking Pies of cooked lamb, cheese, currants and pine nuts (from *Cheese*), and a Hazelnut and Raspberry Cake (from *Cake*) with a Jasmine Tea Sorbet and hot Spiced Tea (both from *Tea*). These books certainly took me on a delicious and informative journey. My favourite? That's as difficult to choose as to select which dishes I enjoyed making and eating the most from them.

Donna Lee Brien is Professor of Creative Industries and Director of Research in the School of Creative and Performing Arts, at Central Queensland University. Donna is currently the Special Issues Editor of TEXT: The Journal of Writing and Writing Courses, a Foundation Editorial Board member of Locale: The Australasian-Pacific Journal of Regional Food Studies and Past President of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs. Her current research includes projects on the impact of Australian food writers and food writing.

Work cited

Kurlansky, Mark. *Choice Cuts: A Selection of Food Writing from around the World*. New York: Jonathan Cape, 2003.