

H-France Forum

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Emma Spary, *Feeding France. New Sciences of Food, 1760-1815*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. xi + 418 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.00 (C). ISBN- 978-1107031050.

Review Essay by Thierry Rigogne, Fordham University

The French see themselves as a nation of lovers of fine food cultivated out of mystical *terroirs* (the *je ne sais quoi* of food and wine connoisseurship), upholding centuries-old traditions of *savoir-vivre*. They love to portray themselves, much like the Gaul village in *Astérix*, as the last holdout in and the antidote to a world dominated by industrial food, *mal-bouffe* and other evils imposed by soulless American-led capitalist globalization (all terms that have become synonymous in French). And yet, the French are also more prosaically the nation of agribusiness. Groups like Danone or Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy contribute far more to the French economy—if very little to the national self-image—than quaint producers of hand-rolled goat cheese (the French see Coca-Cola and McDonald’s as apocalyptic harbingers of globalization, whereas the equally global LVMH or Danone are just signs that “good taste is universal”).

Emma Spary’s latest book, *Feeding France*, takes us to the very roots of the dichotomy between food traditionalism and a nascent food industry, as both developed between the last three decades of the Old Regime, the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Empire. The book documents how a nostalgia-tinged patrimonial gastronomic culture, personified by the founding father of food writing, Brillat-Savarin, grew in parallel with the beginnings of industrial food, eventually creating a sharply bifurcated, if not slightly schizophrenic, national attitude to food (the last conclusion being mine, not the author’s). Spary’s study tracks a series of experimental projects led by a group of public-minded scientists, chemists mostly and agronomists, who explored the nature of food in search of solutions to recurring crises or emergencies affecting food provisioning. Addressing the staples of the French diet, they mobilized and pushed forward scientific knowledge to create surrogates for bread and substitutes for meat, coffee and sugar. In the process, they contributed to popularizing the potato, invented gluten and launched the industrial production of gelatin and beet sugar. Many of their projects, however, collapsed miserably or failed to get embraced by public authorities, Spary is careful to remind us. Still, in the end, the group of science practitioners she follows through her study succeeded in establishing alimentary chemistry, in creating a novel role as public food policy experts for themselves and in laying out the basis for the production and the commercialization of industrial foods. These scientists, entrepreneurs and philanthropists shared crisscrossing professional, institutional and personal connections, forming a dense network which constitutes the backbone of the book. To it belonged famous figures like Lavoisier or Parmentier, who plays a central role, along with many lesser-known, not to say obscure, scientists (at least to general historians), such as Grenet, Darcet or Cadet de Vaux, the latter being the other pole around whom much of the story revolves. This is not told, however, as a narrative tracing the ineluctable rise of one

type of scientific knowledge and the ascent to power of one group of people and their policies. Instead, Spary details the fits and starts, the blind alleys and the wild goose chases, the failures, semi-failures and occasional successes that led to the rise of a chemistry-based alimentary expertise. As she tells it, nothing was inevitable about it. Many other outcomes were possible, as other groups of interest representing different professions, institutions, branches of knowledge or scientific approaches made competing knowledge-claims and vied for similar positions.

This finely-detailed study is full of important insights on many topics ranging from the history of food to the histories of early modern science, chemistry, public policies regarding food provisioning, early industrialization, the rise of experts, and much more. Spary grounds all her claims in micro-studies of specific projects as diverse as the successive schemes to promote the potato, the commercialization of health foods such as *chocolat* and *farine de santé*, or programs to extract gelatin from animal bones, among others. Steeped in particular times and places, the case studies are fleshed out with a focus not just on scientific claims and policies, but also on people and institutions. Spary's approach reminds us that the history of science, knowledge and ideas proceeds through leaps and bounds, propelled by debates and public controversies that serve as catalysts. Her study shows that scientific debates also arose in response to specific political, economic, social and cultural crises that called for or opened the door for new food policies based on new understandings of science during the turbulent decades between 1760 and 1815.

Spary brings the history of early modern science into that of food (and vice versa). Science has been a blind spot in the study of early modern food. Historians have been unwilling or unable to engage with early modern science, and medicine in particular, in serious and productive ways.[1] Most continue to dismiss past scientific claims as nonsensical quackery, judging them deficient, if not foolish, in their inability to meet present standards and fit current theories. Interestingly, such dismissive incomprehension began as the field emerged in the late eighteenth century through the works of the first historians of daily life.[2]

A practiced historian of science, Spary brings a deep command and nuanced understanding of early modern chemistry, medicine and other relevant sciences beyond the grasp of most food historians. It is a particularly welcome intervention in food history because her study deals with the creation of the field itself and the two approaches to food expertise—patrimonial gastronomic and scientific industrial—which Spary delineates have shaped scholarship ever since. Thus, this story illuminates not only important aspects of food history, such as the rise of alimentary chemistry, the creation of industrial food and the birth of new types of food experts, but it also sheds new light on food historiography.

Spary's study builds on exciting insights and approaches developed by historians of science in early modern Europe, a tremendously productive field over the last three decades following the works of Steven Shapin, Simon Schaeffer and Bruno Latour, among others. The social and local turns they promoted have shifted emphasis toward studying the production of knowledge and the creation of public authority in particular social spaces.[3] Spary innovates in food history by analyzing past scientific claims not only as important interventions, some at the cutting edge of contemporary knowledge, but also as representative and constitutive of larger intellectual

currents, activated by specific individuals, grounded within particular social spaces, institutions and networks, amid shifting power relations.

At its core, this study charts the rise of a particular type of expertise. Food experts carved out a space that allowed them to intervene in public debates and shape policies based on the recognition of their scientific authority. To do so, they displaced physicians who had long been the preponderant scientific voice on food. Early modern doctors published alimentary advice which people selectively adapted to their own unique constitution, temperament and conditions. The shift that Spary documents represented not only a switch in scientific approaches, from medical to chemical, or in what kind of public experts were trusted and called upon, but it also marked a critical turning point in ways of thinking about food, health and public policy. Whereas medical advice was based on and tailored to individual characteristics and specific situations, chemical experts pronounced on the nature of foods or their taste in universal terms and devised general policies relying on statistics and quantification that left no space for variation or specificity. The new type of food expertise that emerged at the turn of the nineteenth century has stayed with us, providing the food pyramid, FDA certification or general dietary guidelines, all of which reflect a persistent one-size-fits-all approach to food, health and public policy.

The excellent last chapter on coffee and sugar surrogates, “The Empire of Habit,” strikes a dark note when it warns us that illiberal tendencies, such as a recourse to public deception and a distrust in the consumers’ abilities to make proper decisions by themselves, were both present at the conception of food expertise. Tracking the semi-success in the market of chicory root as a mediocre ersatz coffee and the extraordinary success of beet sugar as a replacement for cane sugar, both against the best scientific opinions of experts, she brings in the most mysterious and intractable of phenomena: consumption. Although it is central to food history, consumption has proved extremely elusive and hard to conceptualize. Why people ate and drank what they did remains as vexing a question as it is intriguing. One of the book’s great strengths is Spary’s careful integration of consumer reactions. Then as now, they always had the last word and their actions held a singular power in politics. In the early nineteenth century, French consumers simultaneously decided that they were fine, at least temporarily, with a beverage that had only the color of coffee along with a very vague approximation of its taste and none of its effects, while they rejected sugar substitutes made from grapes because they wanted the white crystals of cane sugar, which only beet sugar offered. Faced with consumers who privileged appearance above taste, experts scrambled to adjust their research agendas, findings and recommendations, eventually concluding that consumers had poor tastes and could profitably be kept in the dark about provenance (in the case of beet sugar). This was in a sense both a victory for consumers and a defeat for society. Spary’s findings also argue against biological determinism in food consumption (people like sugar because humans are attracted to sweetness, or people drink coffee because caffeine is addictive). The case of surrogates does not tell us why people drank coffee or ate sugar, but it suggests that social habits, practices and cultural meanings played powerful roles, regardless of biology or neurology.

Feeding France comes two short years after Spary’s previous book, *Eating the Enlightenment: Food and the Sciences in Paris, 1670-1760*. Even though the previous study was published by a different press (the University of Chicago Press), the parallel titles, as well as the continuum

in dates suggests that *Feeding France* picks up where *Eating the Enlightenment* ended, the two forming a diptych of sorts that spans quite a period in French history, from Louis XIV's personal reign to the return of the Bourbons after Napoleon was dispatched to Saint-Helena. Similar themes run through the two works. Both focus on food, science and politics, charting the evolution in understandings of food based on shifting scientific views. Both track the birth of food expertise in the context of new foodstuffs or food solutions being introduced into the French diet—coffee, and liqueurs sold in new shops and cafés in the first book, potatoes, gelatin and beet sugar in the second study. Both books chart efforts by various groups of scientists, artisans, shopkeepers and industrialists to claim authoritative food expertise and shape public consumption through print publications and government policies.

Some obvious differences separate the two projects, however, while some continuities would perhaps deserve greater emphasis. It is striking, in this respect, that the introduction to *Feeding France* makes no mention of *Eating the Enlightenment*, while the rest of the study rarely mentions the previous work. Hopefully, this forum will give the author a chance to elaborate on the articulation between her two projects. To take one example, coffee featured centrally in *Eating the Enlightenment*, with whole chapters documenting its introduction into France and its commercialization through the new institution of the café. *Feeding France* picks up in 1760, but coffee figures only indirectly, as a new staple in need of surrogates when revolutionary politics and wars made its consumption problematic between 1793 and 1815. The shift in emphasis between the two books reflects changing scientific and economic realities. Yet, the story covered in the first book, beginning in 1670, ran well past 1760. Debates between café owners and distillers to establish authoritative knowledge-claims over coffee and other liqueurs in order to control their commercialization were far from settled, while the revolution and empire created new commercial and institutional frameworks. Medical debates over the properties of coffee continued to rage well into the 1780s and later. But, when read in succession the two books give the impression that debates over coffee had been settled by 1760, only to resurface under a completely different form as a search for surrogates when the coffee supply from the Caribbean got cut off by wars and blockade. Likewise, potential connections with the ideas and programs of the *économistes* and social reformers central to Spary's second volume are not explored. Her brilliant discussion of coffee and sugar surrogates at the turn of the nineteenth century ignores earlier projects and debates that were rooted in investigations into the properties of coffee covered extensively in her previous book, and framed later inquiries. By the same token, neither work covered earlier coffee and sugar supply crises during the wars of the eighteenth century, especially the Seven Years' War (1756-1763). The specificity of the issues faced between 1793 and 1815 and the solutions developed during the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars would be brought into sharper relief by comparison.

Granted, all studies need arbitrary cutting points and Spary did not endeavor to write a history of coffee. What the case of coffee suggests, however, is that the choice of 1760 as a breaking point may have created a greater rupture with the previous period than warranted. To put it another way, if her exploration of the role of the quest for coffee and sugar surrogates is extremely convincing as a contributor to the rise of scientific food expertise, it does not quite pick up on the first volume's exploration of the role debates over coffee (sugar was not included) played in the creation of new sciences of food. After the first book's healthy dose of

coffee, a serving of chicory in the second volume, no matter how expertly prepared, leaves the reader longing for more.

This is not a criticism of Spary's projects but a reminder that French coffee (and sugar) still awaits its historian. Emma Spary must be commended for providing many sharp insights and for opening up promising avenues for research that anyone who wishes to carry out such a project will do well to pursue. This rich, nuanced and innovative exploration of the nexus of science, food and politics is an important contribution to food history but also to social, cultural, political and intellectual history.

NOTES

[1] One bright exception is Ken Albala's work. See, in particular, *Eating Right in the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

[2] André Guillaume Contant d'Orville, *Précis d'une Histoire générale de la vie privée des François* (Paris: Moutard, 1779) and Pierre Jean-Baptiste LeGrand d'Aussy, *Histoire de la vie privée des François, depuis l'origine de la nation jusqu'à nos jours*, 3 vols. (Paris: Ph.-D. Pierres, 1782).

[3] Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air Pump: Hobbes, Boyle and the Experimental Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1987).

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