

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 Sean Takats, George Mason University

At first glance, Emma Spary's *Feeding France* might seem unlikely to shed new light on the well-worked ground of eighteenth-century French food. Among others, in recent years historians have examined its institutions, its practitioners and their health claims, and the gendered labor behind it.[1] Not least of all, Spary herself is author most recently of *Eating the Enlightenment: Food and the Sciences in Paris, 1670-1760*. [2] Nonetheless, Spary seizes the opportunity to advance the narrative of the purportedly healthful cuisine of the eighteenth century not to the expected Carême, Escoffier, and Robuchon of the nineteenth through twenty-first centuries, but rather to the rise of industrialized manufacture and a new political economy of food consumption. This trajectory might be unsettling or even unconvincing to those who would consider themselves food historians, but it is entirely logical given the stated aims of the eighteenth century's *cuisine moderne*, which sought to maintain the health of its consumers through the application of chemical and medical knowledge to the practices of the kitchen.

In *Feeding France*, the new science of chemistry takes center stage. Spary quickly dispenses with the romantic, gastronomic, artisanal strand of eighteenth-century cuisine and instead focuses on its scientific, efficient, and industrial twin. In seeking to map the latter, Spary focuses on chemists, who she argues claimed particular expertise in the composition of foodstuffs and their improvement. Largely absent from what follows are others who claimed precisely the same authority: cooks, physicians, and the countless armchair dieticians who critiqued the avowedly healthful but notoriously corrupting cuisine of the eighteenth century. Indeed, the emerging industrial world that Spary describes will eventually exclude those who cannot successfully claim to be chemists above all. Instead her book “asks which aspects of food culture and consumption were conquered by chemical experts, how their public authority was constituted, and where and why it failed” (p. 6).

Acting at the intersection of chemistry – the great new science of the Enlightenment – and human consumption, pharmacists in particular serve as Spary's key translators between chemistry and food. But while pharmacists may have been particularly successful at advancing this self-serving narrative, it's also the case that chemical thinking was becoming ubiquitous during this time. The life sciences had come to embrace chemical thinking when anatomical structure and mechanics could no longer explain physiological function. The animal body's core function of digestion, for example, was understood by the second quarter of the eighteenth century to be chiefly chemical in nature, rather than a crushing, grinding, or fermenting process. Yet this new understanding may reveal less about food and digestion than it does about the

pervasiveness of chemistry at the time. As Hjalmar Fors has recently shown, chemical thinking lay at the center of Enlightenment thought during the eighteenth century's later decades.[3]

Underpinning the attention to chemistry is a preoccupation with epistemic authority: Spary views every dietary transaction as simultaneously corporeal – I am physically consuming this food product – and also epistemic – I am accepting all knowledge claims made by its producers and vendors. This logic enables Spary to connect health foods' discourse to the practices of their consumption, but it also risks obscuring the epistemological gaps between producers and consumers, in the same way that we cannot assume that readers accept all the claims made by an author. There's no reason to conclude that food sidestepped the process of appropriation (and of course it's easy today to imagine why someone might want to consume "organic" or "kosher" or "health" foods for reasons that diverge significantly from the foods' stated claims).

Nonetheless, this sustained attention to the scientific claims made around food proves to be a powerful tool, allowing Spary to ground her findings about food's political significance in the physiology of the day. For example, *Feeding France* includes a chapter that traces the shifting significance of sugar and coffee consumption through the vicissitudes of the Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, and the resulting disruptions in colonial trade. Spary roots her analysis in the corporeal dimensions of consumption, with the contemporary understanding that such foods effected "permanent changes in the body's fabric, which it was difficult to reverse and dangerous to disrupt." (p. 269) This approach allows Spary to argue convincingly that efforts to identify and market surrogate sweeteners like beet sugar and grape syrup required a new configuration of consumer, government, and science that presaged future industrial consumption of all sorts of commodities, food and otherwise.

Sweeteners function as just one of the case studies of health foods (and the debates that surrounded them) that comprise the bulk of *Feeding France*. Of these case studies, two others are particularly noteworthy: Spary's treatment of chocolate, and her analysis of meat bouillon. By the eighteenth century, chocolate already had a long history of purported health benefits, but these qualities faced unprecedented scrutiny in the 1780s, as health institutions sought to authenticate these claims as well as demarcate their own realm of authority. By juxtaposing two versions of an advertisement for "pectoral and stomachic" chocolate, Spary clearly demonstrates how the refusal of the Société Royale de Médecine to endorse chocolate's curative properties clearly delineated spheres of medical expertise that could be credibly claimed by producers and institutions (pp. 138-139). In the long run, this conservative approach would prove to marginalize the Société and other institutions during the Revolution.

While we may already recall that bouillon constituted the first "restaurant," in *Feeding France*, Spary significantly advances our understanding of the "the humble stock cube." After briefly treating Lavoisier's experiments on the specific gravity of meat bouillon in an earlier chapter, Spary later masterfully draws together developments in disparate domains of technology, political economy, and natural history that animated the quest to develop an efficient and nutritious substitute for meat in the form of gelatin derived from bones. A goal of supreme strategic importance, meat jelly would serve as the bedrock of the Revolution. This exercise traces a clear trajectory from the kitchen to the factory, as soup essentially becomes an industrial product freighted with commercial and military significance.

Each of Spary's case studies is deeply researched, drawing on an impressive array of archival sources, contemporary publications, and product advertisements. And like her chemists and pharmacists, *Feeding France* profits from Spary's own extensive expertise operating herself at the intersection of (the history of) science and food. She succeeds in situating eighteenth-century French food precisely where it belongs, and where its producers have been telling us all along how it should be understood: as a fundamentally scientific endeavor.

NOTES

[1] Rebecca L. Spang, *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Sean Takats, *The Expert Cook in Enlightenment France* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011); Jennifer J. Davis, *Defining Culinary Authority: The Transformation of Cooking in France, 1650-1830* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2013).

[2] E. C. Spary, *Eating the Enlightenment: Food and the Sciences in Paris, 1670-1760* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2014).

[3] Hjalmar Fors, *The Limits of Matter: Chemistry, Mining, and Enlightenment* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

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