

## GETTING ON A HIGH HORSE ABOUT FOOD

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**Anne Meis Knupfer.** *Food Co-ops in America: Communities, Consumption, and Economic Democracy.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013. 272 pp. Figures, appendix, notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.95.

**Helen Zoe Veit.** *Modern Food, Moral Food: Self-Control, Science, and the Rise of Modern American Eating in the Early Twentieth Century.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013. xiii + 300. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$39.95.

I spent this past summer living on a 6,000-acre cattle ranch in the northern Plains. I was there to study the history of regional food traditions. The rancher who managed the place traveled for rodeos and occasional vacations, but he spent the majority of his time within a seventy-five mile radius of the ranch. Within that area, he had access to two cities and one small town that offered mechanical services, supply stores, and restaurants where he would treat himself after completing his errands. Closer to home, I observed, he relied on gas stations and convenience stores for most of his daily fare, including hot dogs, crackers, and sweets.

After a few weeks of watching him crisscross the barnyard that was adjacent to the house where I lived, I began to join him as he went about his ranch chores and took trips into town. Bumping along in his pickup truck or tractor, we bantered good-naturedly about politics: my liberal, urban, and Democrat point-of-view to his conservative, rural, and libertarian one. Shared meals naturally became part of our routine. But here our repartee stopped. We could talk about politics, but not about dinner.

I ate mostly vegetarian food, almost always homemade, usually Asian or Middle Eastern inspired, organic when possible, and preferably from a local co-op or farm market. Thanks to Wendell Berry's *Home Economics* (1987), Marion Nestle's *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* (2002), and Michael Pollan's *Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (2006), I was preoccupied with the environmental, health, and ethical practices behind nearly every bite of food I took in. The rancher, on the other hand, ate without an axe to grind. He possessed the sort of first-

hand knowledge of the American food system that I could only read about, but food did not carry nearly the moral weight for him that it did for me. He regularly ordered steak with no concern for its origins, enjoyed without guilt cooked vegetables laden with cheese sauce, and drank soda without a worry. Foods that gave me stress, or sometimes nostalgia—such as a white bread, bologna, and American cheese sandwich—he could relish without any sense of remorse, distress, discomfort, or irony. Why did I get on my high horse about food? Why didn't he?

James McWilliams, in his insightful book *Just Food: Where Locavores Get It Wrong and How We Can Truly Eat Responsibly* (2009), raised a similar quandary about contemporary food extremes in what he referred to as an actual "food war." McWilliams advocated for establishing some useful middle ground between relying on agribusiness and conventional foods (read, the rancher's bologna) and locavore modes of production and consumption (read, my artisanal bread). That is reasonable advice, but getting people to change their diet and attitudes toward food is easier said than done.

Along with ethical issues over the proper types of food to consume, as the rancher and I debated (or, rather, I debated and the rancher observed with good humor), are moral judgments about eating too much or too little, and debates over whose food advice to follow. What does it mean to eat responsibly and where did that concept originate? Who is accountable for anyone's personal eating habits and food access: the consumer alone, health professionals, the food industry, or the government? Who should decide what constitutes a good or poor diet anyway? These issues are not just rhetorical but central to the current food system as consumers struggle to make their own decisions about what to eat and reformers seek to assist at-risk communities to improve their health and well-being through a change in diet.

Taking a cue from John Coveney's *Food, Morals and Meaning: The Pleasures and Anxiety of Eating* (2000), Helen Zoe Veit's *Modern Food, Moral Food: Self-Control, Science, and the Rise of Modern American Eating in the Early Twentieth Century* is a part of the maturing field of food histories that treat diet and nutrition as cultural constructions to be analyzed, rather than scientific facts to be supported or refuted. As Charlotte Biltekoff wrote in her terrific *Eating Right in America: The Cultural Politics of Food and Health* (2013): "There is no such thing as dietary health apart from social ideals and, therefore, dietary ideals are never simply objective reflections of nutritional facts" (p. 6). Historians, no doubt, want to improve Americans' health as much as any nutritionist. Yet instead of being prescriptive about diet, they encourage dietitians and common eaters to recognize that food and food recommendations are not simply discoveries from the lab, but cultural ideas rooted in history and identity. The catchphrase is that we are what we eat, when, in actuality, what we eat shows who we are.

Turning food into a moral issue certainly did not start in the Progressive Era, yet Viet is convincing when she argues that a specific kind of moralism arose in this time period that is foundational to the ways many Americans in the twenty-first century derive a sense of personal virtue, or anxiety, from what they do and do not eat. Viet argues that a combination of factors, including food conservation programs during World War I, new scientific discoveries about nutrition, the rise of home economics and professionalization of housework, and new ideas about the body together gave rise to dramatically new attitudes toward food, identity, and mores that still dominate today. The basic shift that opened the door to this modern way of eating and moralizing about food, she contends, was a new reliance on experts and on reason to determine what to eat, instead of basing the decision on tradition and emotions. Viet writes that, for white middle-class women, in particular, diet became a conscious expression of their citizenship, class, and race. Willpower, we learn from *Modern Food, Moral Food*, is not simply a declaration of personal virtue but also of cultural politics.

As is the case with almost anyone who writes about American food history, Veit owes a great deal of debt to Harvey Levenstein's *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (1988) and *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America* (1993), as well as Laura Shapiro's *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century* (2001). To those who have read these classics in the field, much will be familiar. Yet Veit expands upon this earlier scholarship by deftly examining food and nutrition innovations in the context of the war effort to argue for a whole new American psychology of food.

Viet's section on the U.S. Food Administration's conservation program during World War I is one of her strongest because she illustrates so well how closely many Americans intertwined personal food decisions with the nation's political and wartime goals and their own sense of self-worth. To make her case, Viet draws on a rich trove of letters from citizens who wrote to the newly formed government agency. Founded in 1917 and directed by Herbert Hoover, who had been chairman of the Commission for Relief in Belgium, the U.S. Food Administration's slogan was: "Food will win the war." Its mission was to feed American troops and to provide food aid to Allied civilians and soldiers in Europe.

Viet argues that the key to the program's success was that, instead of *requiring* Americans to ration food for the cause, the government *asked* them to voluntarily conserve and to substitute what were deemed more valuable foods, such as beef, flour, butter, and sugar, for less desirable ones, such as chicken, fish, corn, and peanut butter. To refrain from eating, or to sacrifice favorite foods in their daily fare, required individual acts of self-control and self-discipline, which imbued Americans with a sense of good citizenship

but also self-righteousness. Viet calls this the “moral value of austerity” (p. 14). She writes, “The fervency of patriotic food control helped fuel a quasi-religious asceticism that transcended the demands of war itself, giving rise to an enduring brand of popular self-denial premised on physical and moral mastery of the self” (p. 182).

Broadening her scope beyond the home front, Viet analyzes the ways President Woodrow Wilson’s administration made use of its domestic food-conservation program as propaganda worldwide. It proclaimed the superiority of U.S. democracy because the nation was able to feed the world and because its citizens chose to “self-govern” and sacrifice their own food stores for the common good, instead of being coerced to do so. Viet points out how wartime food aid was not so much philanthropic but economically strategic as the United States became a lender nation and other countries began to “accept American goods and values into their markets and their lives” after the war (p. 76). By arguing for the political dimensions of women’s home cooking, Viet builds on Amy Kaplan’s “Manifest Domesticity,”<sup>1</sup> James McWilliams’ *A Revolution in Eating: How the Quest for Food Shaped America* (2007), and my own *Pumpkin: The Curious History of an American Icon* (2012).

Viet states that the food conservation program was made more feasible, however less palatable, because of the new science of nutrition and the new home economics profession. Experts in these fields re-envisioned eating as a rational selection of nutrients instead of as a source of pleasure or tradition. Envisioning food as being made up of component parts, such as the newly discovered vitamins and calories, made food substitutions seem reasonable. According to rational thinking at the time, as long as someone got protein, in theory, it mattered little if it came from beef or peanut butter because food’s primary value derived from its nutrition. To get people to eat differently, therefore, required appeals to reason and intellect. Taste, enjoyment, and custom were suspect. Sound familiar?

Viet achieves her primary aim to show the persistence of Progressive Era food identity issues in her chapter on the social aspects of body size and weight. Before the war, weight loss was an uncommon preoccupation and carried little social stigma because the problem for most people was having too little food, not too much. The long-term impacts of exercising food restraint for the war effort and of depending on expert knowledge to guide food choices was that being overweight became not simply a sign of poor health but poor character, too. Thinness, in contrast, became a physical marker of a person’s self-restraint, which had morphed into a moral virtue, a sign of intelligence, and a characteristic of the white middle class.

Viet works hard in each section of the book to show how assumptions about food choices were the purview of the few and not available to the many. As Biltkoff does in *Eating Right*, Viet recounts how white middle-class women

thought of their food habits as not simply personal character traits but as expressions of social identity that they relied on to distinguish themselves from poorer segments of society and from people of other races and ethnicities. Although these women are at the heart of Viet's history, she interweaves perspectives of people of lower economic standing where she can. One of the best examples of that are the quotations from the letters poor people sent to the U.S. Food Administration that vehemently stated that wartime food substitutes, such as chicken—much less the foods the government recommended that people conserve, such as beef—were beyond their financial wherewithal. Viet also documents the ways African Americans supported war conservation efforts, made viable businesses in the food industry, and took part in the new nutrition revolution, even as white eugenicists and euthenists, who believed in the possibility of social uplift, disparaged African American food traditions as primitive and irrational.

A rare inconsistency in Viet's book occurs when she argues that white middle-class Americans rejected tradition for cutting-edge research as their guide to food choices, yet then describes how they looked to colonial American heritage to support the consumption of simple foods and one-pot meals during and after the war. This contradiction is less an error than an indicator of the conflicting motivations Americans face when they sit down to eat. Viet devotes almost no analysis to this sort of anxiety. It would have been enlightening to see how these women wrestled with or failed to uphold these moral food choices, instead of simply illustrating how they adopted them and tried to push them on others.

The way Viet's *Modern Food, Moral Food* splices the Progressive Era to the present time raises the question of what the connective historical threads are that make food-morality issues from a hundred years ago still so relevant today. Biltkoff's *Eating Right* does much to fill that gap by continuing where Viet leaves off. Without casting doubt on the good intentions of modern-day foodies and health professionals, Biltkoff argues that they are complicit in the same identity politics as their predecessors. In other words, Biltkoff thinks that white middle-class Americans need to think critically regarding their ideas about good food and health and their judgments against others who do not conform to a middle-class way of eating. She argues that American reformers and concerned eaters may be well meaning but that they "shore up" social differences and cultural divisions, whether they mean to do so, or not.

Viet's and Biltkoff's books are mostly histories of ideas. They mainly tell us how people are thinking about food, instead of procuring or preparing it. For a social analysis of food shopping, there is a long overdue history of American co-ops: Anne Meis Knupfer's *Food Co-ops in America: Communities, Consumption, and Economic Democracy* (2013). Grocery shopping is certainly

one of the main arenas where ideas of health and social disparities play out. Knupfer asks probing and thoughtful questions about how communities since the 1800s have sought empowerment through alternative food consumption methods. She wants to know how food consumption has been a means of community building across racial, ethnic, and class lines. Alternatively, how has it exacerbated social and cultural divides?

Knupfer delves into the business records of co-ops, and she relies on her own experiences visiting and shopping at co-ops around the country to answer these questions. While both research approaches make a lot of sense, in this case, they may have led the author to stress the financial operations of food co-ops and her personal preferences instead of to analyze how co-op members have struggled with, and often failed, to make their ideals a working reality. For example, her explanation for the reasons the Adamant Food Co-operative in Vermont, which began in 1935, is the oldest surviving co-op in the country—because of its “rich traditions, the dedication of its members, and an independent spirit that some would say is characteristic of native Vermonters”—reads more like an advertisement than a scholarly analysis (p. 11). Yet it is typical of the ways Knupfer flattens complexities.

Expanding the scope of Warren Belasco’s *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry* (1989), she raises fascinating issues about coalition and community building, about the social and economic tensions inherent in ethical-minded businesses, and about food shopping being a source for moral good and activism. But she rarely delves into the nitty-gritty and messy politics of food co-ops; neither does she build a strong argument for how they have transformed food quality and access, social relations within communities, food retail business models, or food mores. Nevertheless, Knupfer offers a comprehensive historical overview of the subject and introduces compelling case studies, so anyone who plans to do further research on the topic will be remiss if they do not rely on *America Food Co-ops*.

Knupfer defines food co-ops as “stores collectively owned by members who pool their monies and resources, sometimes their labor, and make decisions democratically about their businesses’ policies, products, and work structures” (p. 2). Her basic argument is that, when food co-ops expanded too much, they lost their democratic ideals, and so the best co-ops are the ones that remained small scale, such as the Adamant co-op. The aim of “economic democracy,” which Knupfer sees as a defining principle of food co-ops, is, according to the 2012 Economic Democracy Conference, “to provide economic empowerment to all citizens and all local communities, and to prevent the concentration of economic power that subverts mass political and economic empowerment”<sup>2</sup> It is an ideal that is not easy to obtain.

Perhaps when most people think of food co-ops these days, they envision bulk bins, natural foods, a green aesthetic, and white middle-class custom-

ers, but Knupfer's history records a different sort of co-op. She divides her book into three chronological sections, each of which features different food shopping issues and membership. The first is a one-chapter cursory summary of food co-ops before the Great Depression. Farmers, laborers, and ethnic groups—such as the Working Man's Protective Union started in Boston in 1845 and the First Swedish Mercantile Co-operative Company in Worcester, Massachusetts, founded in 1884—pooled their money to create buying clubs in order to secure good prices and to prevent profits from going to larger capitalist enterprises.

From the 1930s to the 1950s, we learn that housewives' associations organized food co-ops in reaction to unethical practices of grocery-store chains, including inaccurate food labeling. African American women formed co-ops to ensure courteous treatment in stores and to educate their communities about food safety. University communities at Cornell and Dartmouth started local co-ops for consumer advocacy and education purposes. The reason that Knupfer usually cites for the collapse of most of these earlier enterprises is lack of capital or competition—that is, a failed business model. Incredible events, such as when African Americans joined the Finnish-organized Waukegan Trading Company in Illinois in the early twentieth century, cry out for deeper cultural and social analysis. We know from Viet's *Modern Food, Moral Food* what propelled white women to make food a moral issue, but how did these other groups make food meaningful, and how and why did such different people come together to make food a united social cause? Can they offer models for communities today?

The last section—on the period from the 1960s to the 1990s—and the epilogue that brings readers up to the present look at the rise of the environmentally savvy, greengrocer type co-op, with which most Americans are now familiar. Knupfer argues that the success and growth of co-ops in this era led to a less democratic ethos as the store management often took over the decision-making process for the entire membership. Other co-ops expanded too much and so failed as a business, or they closed because they could not compete with the prices of neighboring conventional grocery stores. It would have been helpful to know more about the dilemmas members faced when they had to balance their social ideals and food mores with their business' bottom line. It also would have been good to have a clearer picture of what co-ops looked like, how they were designed, and how people used them over time. Did co-ops historically have their own aesthetic, a unique way of displaying food or organizing space?

It is hard for me not to like small-scale co-ops stocked with organic and local produce, sweet-smelling plant-based body products, and community-education pamphlets that Knupfer describes as success stories. But it is also

difficult to figure out how they are economically democratic across race, ethnic, and class lines rather than just another expression of white middle-class privilege and mores. While I like to shop at them, I do not think the rancher has ever even set foot in one.

The rancher and I did find common ground with a BLT on whole wheat. The compromise was not easy because, as these books inform us, to change one's appetite is to change one's values. Anyone who picks up these books will better understand the political and social dimensions of American dietary choices and advocacy, but they will learn more about white middle-class Americans than anyone else. As these scholars themselves acknowledge, more historians need to cross race and class boundaries so that people from a variety of backgrounds are part of the mainstream narrative of American food history, instead of at the margins. This mission is vital to avoid having our food histories simply duplicate the cultural and social divides that many historians purport to critique.

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1. Amy Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity," *American Literature* 70 (September 1998): 581–606.
2. Economic Democracy Conference; <http://economicdemocracyconference.org/the-meaning-of-economic-democracy/>.