

BOOK REVIEW

The Food of China. E.N. Anderson. New Haven and London: Yale University Press. 1990. Pp. xv, 313. \$23.50 hardcover. ISBN:0-300-03655-7. (Also available in paperback.)

To call this book simply “The Food of China” is a modest understatement of its broad scope and the wealth of information it contains. Easy to read and extremely entertaining, the book will be enjoyed by anyone with a fascination for history, anthropology, archaeology, language, nutrition, medicine, politics, human ecology, and/or literature. Any ethnobiologist will find it completely engrossing.

Many stories are interwoven: the origins of agriculture, the development of different styles of agriculture based on ecological and historical factors, the origins of different cooking techniques, regional variations in foods and beverages, the introduction and adoption of foods from different parts of the world, the influences on food and food production of various rulers and officials, the effects of dynastic conflicts, wars and other such events, as well as a review of the pertinent literature, both ancient and modern.

The book is organized into twelve chapters. The first provides background information on the geography, climate and vegetation of China. Chapters two to seven comprise a chronological account of the foods of China, with in-depth discussions of early peoples in China, the origins of agriculture, development of cultivation and food preparation techniques, and the effects of political events on food. Chapter eight describes in vivid detail the foods and beverages of modern Chinese cuisine—soybeans, peppers, mustard greens, sweet potatoes, squash and melons, tree fruits, tea, fish, shellfish, and other aquatic animal foods, poultry, pork, mutton, and water buffalo, to name just a few. Chapter nine describes basic cooking strategies, with descriptions of vessels, utensils and cooking methods. Chapter ten is devoted to regional differences in foods and food preparation. Chapter eleven discusses the close and inseparable linkage between food and medicine in Chinese culture. Finally, Chapter twelve rounds out the book with a discussion of the social aspects of food and recent influences on Chinese cuisine.

Every page is crammed with fascinating details relating to food, history and culture. On page 77, for example, is the story of the introduction in 1011, during the Sung Dynasty, of a new short-growing-season, drought-resistant rice from Champa and a new heavy-yielding variety of Indian green lentil (possibly the green mung bean). Emperor Chang-tsung dispatched envoys to secure these

varieties, which were immediately planted. When the first harvests were reaped the Emperor called his top ministers to taste them and composed poems in praise of these new wonder crops. The Champa rice was highly significant because it allowed a vast increase in double-cropping, which became a common practice in southeastern China.

On page 160, we learn that tomatoes were introduced to China from the West in the 1500s and were promptly named *fan chieh* ("barbarian eggplant"). Also, the name, *k'e tsap*, meaning "tomato sauce" in Cantonese, is not the original term from which English "ketchup" or "catsup" was derived; the latter terms are cognate with French *escabeche* and Spanish *escabeche*, meaning "food in sauce."

On page 252, Anderson discusses the use of monosodium glutamate (MSG), now widely associated with Chinese cooking. In fact, it is a relatively recent addition, originating from a Japanese seaweed preparation marketed just after the turn of the century. In Anderson's opinion, its introduction was an unfortunate one, since it is allergenic to many people, and "adds a heavy, harsh, metallic taste to Chinese food and wrecks the subtle and complex blending of flavors essential to fine cuisine ..." Any page, turned to at random, yields such intriguing morsels of information.

This authoritative yet thoroughly readable book is enhanced by a fine, detailed index. The only improvement, in my opinion, would be the addition of illustrations, modern and historical, to enable the reader to visualize more easily the topics under discussion.

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