



PROJECT MUSE®

---

*A Revolution in Eating: How the Quest for Food Shaped  
America , and: Eating Culture: The Poetics and Politics of  
Food (review)*

Theresa A. Vaughan

Journal of American Folklore, Volume 122, Number 483, Winter 2009,  
pp. 108-110 (Review)

Published by American Folklore Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jaf.0.0067>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/256985>

behind their respective courses of action seems fallacious.

Rosenberg's occasional conflation of two distinct kinds of divergence from bluegrass convention bespeaks a characteristic of *Bluegrass: A History* that might or might not be considered a shortcoming, depending on one's purposes in reading it. Throughout, Rosenberg subordinates his discussion of bluegrass as sonic art to his discussion of the music as an artifact of cultural history. Though he does discuss aspects of the evolution of bluegrass musical style, he focuses principally on those developments that have been most immediately perceptible to listeners (e.g., innovations in instrumentation) and those that have had definite social implications or a pronounced commercial impact. These are not necessarily the developments that would seem most significant from a musician's or music theorist's perspective, and although Rosenberg's observations are generally accurate, he does not formulate them in precise analytical terms. Consequently, the conclusions that he draws from sonic evidence occasionally seem somewhat misguided, and those who seek a comprehensive history of the composition and performance of bluegrass music will not find it here.

Nevertheless, those who seek an exemplary comprehensive history of bluegrass music as a component of American popular culture should turn to this book, as have numerous readers over the past twenty years. Rather than revising the original text to bring it up to date, Rosenberg adds a preface succinctly enumerating major occurrences in bluegrass history since *Bluegrass: A History* was originally published, much as Cantwell does in the 2003 edition of *Bluegrass Breakdown*. The decision not to revise the text of either book to give proportional consideration to recent developments (as the most recent editions of two of Bill Malone's books on southern vernacular music do) might seem a missed opportunity. However, Rosenberg correctly observes that "describing the many changes in the world of bluegrass since 1985 would take another book of the same size" (p. ix), and his preface does identify many of the most consequential developments of the intervening years, reflecting

his sound historical judgment. (Some might take issue, for various reasons, with the degree of attention that both Rosenberg and Cantwell devote to *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, but that is a small matter.)

*Bluegrass: A History* is a superb treatment of its subject. One could, however, envision a history of bluegrass, equal in scope to Rosenberg's, that would integrate a comprehensive account of the evolution of bluegrass as sonic art with a careful examination of the structural transformation of the socioeconomic milieu from which the music emerged, incorporating the findings of substantial ethnographic research—a tall order, to say the least. Nonetheless, judging from the encouragement to extend the boundaries of bluegrass scholarship that Rosenberg has generously offered to others, both at the Bluegrass Music Symposium and in his new preface to this book, it seems that he would welcome such a development, as would scores of other "believers in bluegrass."

**A Revolution in Eating: How the Quest for Food Shaped America.** By James E. McWilliams. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. Pp. 387, 22 illustrations, notes, bibliography, index.)

**Eating Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Food.** Ed. Tobias Döring, Markus Heide, and Susanne Mühleisen. American Studies Monograph Series, Vol. 106. (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2003. Pp. 284, acknowledgments, notes on contributors, index.)

THERESA A. VAUGHAN  
*University of Central Oklahoma*

These two books have something in common: they are written from the viewpoint of American history/American studies and they are not written by or for folklorists. James E. McWilliams (author of *A Revolution in Eating*) is a historian, and the contributors to *Eating Culture* come from anthropology, sociology, English literature, and American studies. All but one, Sidney W. Mintz, are European. Both books offer an interesting perspective on Amer-

ican and British foodways, both historical and contemporary.

*A Revolution in Eating* is essentially divided into two thematic parts. In chapters 1 to 5, McWilliams presents a broad overview of the economy and eating habits of colonial New England, the Chesapeake Bay region, the Middle Colonies, the Carolinas, and the English West Indies. What was the primary means of maintaining the economy from the point of view of the food grown? What were the culinary preferences of the English settlers in each region? What were the foodways of the indigenous Indians, and how much did they influence the English settlers? What were the foodways of the slave population, if present, and how did they derive from West African foodways, the demands of slave labor, and the availability of staple foods? Through a careful presentation of available historical documentation (import/export records, taxes, archeological evidence, cookbooks, and other writing that referenced food), McWilliams argues that one can array the basic economy and food choices of the colonies along a continuum based upon the variables listed above.

At one extreme was New England, where the economy was based on self-sufficient small farms that replicated an economy that existed in England at that time. As a consequence of that economy and of the determination of the Puritan settlers to maintain a familiar lifestyle, foodways remained closer to those in England than those of any of the other settled regions. With minimal slavery in the region, there was little West African influence in New England. Some accommodations were made to Indian foodways and native North American food—most notably corn (maize) and wild game. At the opposite end of the continuum were the West Indies. There, English settlers were relatively few in comparison to the imported slave population, which was primarily from West Africa. The colonists' goal was not to set up a miniature English society but rather to make money through a lucrative monoculture—sugar cane. Slaves were given as few supplies as possible by the plantation owners, and malnutrition was sometimes endemic. They were, however, given their own small plots of land

and some time during the week to grow their own food. Thus, West African foodways were more closely replicated there, along with the integration of locally available staples and the development of a thriving marketplace, as excess produce could be sold by slaves. Native Indian populations were largely decimated, but some techniques of fishing and cultivation did pass from Indians to the African slave population.

Between these two extremes, the economy and foodways varied, depending upon the availability and nature of a cash crop, the relative presence of a plantation system, the amount of freedom that slaves had to produce their own food and replicate West African foodways, the ratio of British settlers to slaves and Indians, and the relationship with Indians and the willingness of the whites to adopt Indian staples and some foodways.

The second part of the book examines the colonies after they had become well established and the attachment to English culture as it vied with the desire to develop a separate American identity. All of this is largely viewed through the culinary habits of the colonists. McWilliams's basic argument is that, in the decades before the revolutionary period, the colonies were enamored of all things English, but during and after the revolutionary period Americans strove to develop their own identities, culinary and otherwise.

Overall, *A Revolution in Eating* is carefully researched and well written, often with a welcome, wry sense of humor enlivening the historical data. The citation style was rather disconcerting at first—there are no footnotes, endnotes, or in-text citations. Rather, there are notes at the back of the book which list page numbers, quote a brief section of the text, and provide citation information. Also somewhat unsettling is the lack of reference to relevant folkloristic or anthropological scholarship. Strikingly, the entire chapter on the sugar plantations in the West Indies makes no reference to Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (Viking Penguin, 1985). From a folkloristic perspective, McWilliams's work would have been richer if the author had strayed somewhat outside of the

historical literature alone. Since folklorists and anthropologists were not the intended audience, however, perhaps one should not expect this.

*Eating Culture*, edited by Tobias Döring, Markus Heide, and Susanne Mühleisen, presents another take on American and British ways of eating. The book is a compilation of articles largely taken from the international symposium *Eating Culture: The Politics and Poetics of Food Today*, which took place in Germany in the spring of 2000 at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main. The combined ideas of twelve non-American authors on British and American foodways and literature—and also the minority foodways in those two countries—provides access to the perspective of the “other” for American (and also, presumably, British) readers.

The collection is divided into three parts: “Culinary Politics: Creolization and Identification,” “Edible Fictions: The Poetics of Food Writing and Translation,” and “Visual Pleasures: Food Images and the Hungry Gaze.” While many disciplinary perspectives are included throughout, part 1 uses sociological, historical, and anthropological approaches; part 2 largely offers literary analyses; and part 3 takes its perspective from film studies.

One widely explored issue is the problem of authenticity in cuisine and race/ethnicity. This is examined in Berndt Ostendorf’s chapter “‘Jambalaya, Crawfish Pie, File Gumbo’: The Creolizing Cuisines of New Orleans,” Ching Lin Pang’s “Beyond ‘Authenticity’: Reinterpreting Chinese Immigrant Food in Belgium,” Shirley Tate’s “Talking Identities: Food, Black ‘Authenticity’ and Hybridity,” Mark Stein’s “Curry at Work: Nibbling at the Jewel in the Crown,” Rüdiger Kunow’s “Eating Indian(s): Food, Representation, and the Indian Diaspora in the United States,” and Suzanne Reichl’s “‘Like a Beacon Against the Cold’: Food and the Construction of Ethnic Identities in Black British Novels.” Poverty and nineteenth-century awareness (or lack of awareness) of its societal causes are explored in an interesting article by Sarah Moss entitled “Fetching Broth from Hartfield: Sustaining the Body Politic in Jane Austen’s *Emma*.” Offering a historical perspective,

Heike Paul’s “Tasting America: Food, Race, and Anti-American Sentiments in Nineteenth-Century German-American Writing” provides a window on the reaction of German visitors and immigrants to American foodways or, from the German perspective, the lack of foodways or a recognizable cuisine. Sidney Mintz’s “Eating Communities: The Mixed Appeals of Sodality” analyzes *pho* in the Vietnamese diaspora and donuts in Canada as symbols of identity. Mintz’s article, the first in the collection, helps provide a cohesive theoretical framework that aids in contextualizing the disparate articles that follow.

Overall, the essays in *Eating Culture* do hang together as a coherent volume, although their perspectives are quite diverse. While not all chapters may be relevant to any given reader’s interests, their diversity does serve to provoke interdisciplinary consideration. Additionally, the discomfort that occasionally arises from seeing one’s own culture analyzed by others, particularly when one identifies with one or more of the cuisines being analyzed, is especially edifying. As scholars, all of us struggle with the issues of insider versus outsider perspectives and the desire to remain fair in assessing our subjects. In this context, taking up the perspective of the observed, rather than the observer, is instructive.

**Encyclopedia of Folk Medicine: Old World and New World Traditions.** By Gabrielle Hatfield. (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2004. Pp. xxii + 392, introduction, 47 photographs or other illustrations, references cited following each entry, index.)

CHRIS GOERTZEN

*University of Southern Mississippi*

This encyclopedia has a tighter focus than its title suggests. Gabrielle Hatfield almost exclusively focuses on British and British-derived North American vernacular medicine from the sixteenth century to the present. There are some 242 alphabetically arranged entries, including 13 on “people” (5 on specific individuals, the others on occupations or social roles such as