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Key Ingredients: America by Food (review)

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Exhibit Reviews

Key Ingredients: America by Food. Organized by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, Museum on Main Street, Washington, DC. Curated by Charley Camp. This exhibit is scheduled to travel to over 165 sites between 2003 and 2010.

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Food is currently a hot topic in academia, public policy, and the mass media. The public is enthralled with star chefs, televised cooking shows, eating contests, high-end cookware, designer kitchens, culinary tours, and food in general. It is timely, then, that the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service would sponsor *Key Ingredients: America by Food*, a Museum on Main Street exhibition curated by folklorist Charley Camp. Between 2003 and 2010, the exhibit is scheduled to travel to over 165 sites, including local history museums, public libraries, and small colleges. During 2007, the humanities councils of both Michigan and Ohio hosted *Key Ingredients*. We viewed the exhibit several times in 2007 and 2008 during its display at the Old Mill Museum in Dundee, Michigan, and the Wood County Historical Museum in Bowling Green, Ohio. The exhibit has no catalog.

Defining “American food” is a challenge. Is it simply a dish or ingredient that any American eats, or must the food in some way express the history, culture, and ethos of the country? Can the diversity and complexity of regional and ethnic traditions be boiled down to a few foods that are somehow representative of the nation’s history and culture? Do we include newly introduced or invented foods, along with older ones that may actually be dying out? Can we even say that we have a national cuisine—a publicly articulated, shared set of recipes, in-

gredients, and styles that express who we think we are?

Key Ingredients rises to these challenges. It addresses iconic American foods, such as pizza, hot dogs, and popcorn, but it goes much further, presenting a broader understanding of food as foodways that includes the traditions surrounding all aspects of food. In doing so, it explores the ways in which food expresses, represents, and constructs a nation. While at times overly emphasizing the celebratory aspect of these traditions, the exhibit does not flinch from the historical realities of involuntary contributions to the American diet by Native Americans and African slaves, nor does it ignore the role of capitalism and religion in shaping a diet that has tended to be valued more as fuel than as aesthetic experience. The exhibit, however, is intended for a general audience residing in small communities without the opportunity of viewing in their town an exhibit from the Smithsonian, and its goal is to introduce viewers to the role and meaning of food in their lives. In this, the exhibit is successful, demonstrating that food can be richly thought provoking.

Key Ingredients divides its materials into an introduction and five categories: “Land of Plenty,” “Local Flavors,” “Dynamic Delivery,” “Festival of Flavors,” and “Home Cooking.” The introductory section plays upon a famous quotation from a nineteenth-century French gastronome, asking: “Are we what we eat? The food on the American table may not define exactly what we are as a nation, but the traditions surrounding our foods speak volumes about who we are.” While the distinction between “what” and “who” is not clear to the reviewers, it does seem evident that the exhibit intends to focus on traditions. It would have been helpful, then, to include a definition of tradition, particularly since the term is often misunderstood to refer to old and outdated ways of doing things. If audiences persist with their examina-

tion of the exhibit, however, they will find a broad conception of tradition, since the individual sections clearly demonstrate connections between the past and the present, as well as between processing and product, farm and table, the private and public spheres, and domestic and commercial domains.

The section entitled “Land of Plenty” presents the historical foundations of contemporary American food, displaying the foodways of Native Americans of the eastern seaboard, African slaves, and early British and European colonists. The “Home Cooking” section explores the role of food in family life and includes information on learning to cook, family menus, and food’s centrality in celebrations. As would be expected, Thanksgiving is featured here, with information on both its history and its contemporary variations across region and ethnicity. This display alludes to the romanticization of Thanksgiving, but there is no mention of alternative interpretations of the holiday. Further, the exhibit seems to have an East Coast bias, which appears in other sections as well, in its discussion of regional menus: cornbread dressing is not included in the discussion of the South, and stuffing with cranberries and walnuts, which is presented as a Midwest version of the dish, was not one that either of us associate with that part of the country. Similarly, we found the presentations of “eating together” too simplistic. On a panel titled “Festival of Feasts,” the text reads, “food draws people together. Sharing meals has a way of deepening relationships.” It certainly can function in this way, but commensality can be problematic and divisive, and ignoring that reality does not give an accurate or full picture of food in America.

“Dynamic Delivery” looks at the technologies developed after the Civil War to feed growing cities, such as refrigeration, canning, electric kitchen appliances, national distribution and marketing, and brand imprinting. The subsection “Eating Out,” included in “Festival of Feasts,” presents the commercial and public sphere, an effective way to point out that traditions are not always private. It includes information about several types of eating establishments, such as diners, railroad diners, street

vendors, and fast food, including the fortune cookie and nachos. Similarly, “Local Flavor” emphasizes the power of food to connect people with place by demonstrating many popular, mass-mediated foods that have become traditional and integrated into regional foodways. Ingredients, dishes, and flavors distinctive to differing locales in the United States are described here, along with markets and the marketplace.

The exhibit presents several overarching themes in American food, but the clarity of those themes depends greatly on the actual set-up of the exhibit. *Key Ingredients* measures about 850 square feet and consists of clusters of freestanding panels. Banners with differing images tell the theme of each cluster, but it is not always obvious which panels go together. One installation had a path marked on the floor for visitors to follow; in others, however, the panels seemed to offer random tidbits of information. This is unfortunate. The design is very clever, the content well researched, the displays rich in photographs and text, but the exhibit requires appropriate space and personnel to be effective. Since it was intentionally sent to cultural organizations in small, often rural communities with limited annual budgets, some installations were more successful than others. Responses heard from visitors suggested there was a “visual overload,” with so much information given that they had trouble comprehending the overall pattern and framework. On a survey form, one individual wrote, “It was hard to make sense of how the panels connect.” Another stated that the exhibit requires more “elbow room,” and she wanted places to sit in order to contemplate the displays more thoroughly.

On a more positive note, we feel that one of the many strengths of the exhibit is its photographs. These include both historical reproductions and ethnographic documentation, and tend to be powerful and eye-catching. Occasionally, a photograph calls for more explanation (for example, a picnic scene with a group of well-dressed young white people eating slices of watermelon), but in general, the photos and succinct texts work well to stimulate thought. The exhibit also includes interactive compo-

nents that are both fun and informative, such as lift-up panels for particular foods (apple pie, tomatoes, Indian tacos), and gateways and arches that visitors can walk through. Plexiglas cases hold thirty-five objects, such as cookbooks and cooking implements, adding an interesting three-dimensional quality.

For visitors who want to learn more about American food, a Web site accompanies the exhibit (<http://www.keyingredients.org>). It includes three sections: "500 Years of American Food," "The American Cookbook Project," and "Eating across America." Visitors can contribute their own recipes and food stories to this site, and teachers can access lesson plans and education guides. The section on resources is useful but references few works published after the mid-1990s.

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of *Key Ingredients* is the many offshoots that it has inspired. For example, in collaboration with the Michigan Humanities Council, Yvonne, the state-appointed scholar in Michigan, and the Michigan State University Museum developed *Michigan Foodways*, a statewide exhibit that accompanied *Key Ingredients*. Yvonne then worked with each site to create a local exhibit, which is mandatory for each host site. Sometimes these were as simple as a bulletin board with historical village photographs or displays of old cooking equipment or cookbooks. At other sites, each business in town fabricated an exhibit in its front window (e.g., a bicycle shop displayed a picnic in the country accessed by bikes), school children brought aprons from home and created their own exhibit in the school or the public library, and a college class created a turn-of-the-century miner's kitchen. The programming at each site was also extraordinary: chef competitions, grandmothers teaching children, a play about female farmers, tours of local food producers, and children in a multicultural community bringing recipes and samples of a traditional dish for a school potluck. One site published a community foodways book with recipes and food stories.

In contrast, Ohio had a planning committee that wrote a booklet (*Key Ingredients: Ohio by Food*, edited by Tim Lloyd) and worked with the Ohio Historical Society to offer "Brass

Tacks" workshops on interpreting and installing exhibits. The committee also offered consultation to each site, but those sites were responsible for developing their own exhibits and programs, which varied according to resources and personnel. Lucy worked with one site, the Wood County Historical Museum, to create a traveling exhibit on local traditions, a foodways component for the heritage festival, and a culinary-tourism trail. The presence of *Key Ingredients* also encouraged other organizations in the area to develop events around the theme of food: a film series at the public library, a culinary exposition at the local mall, and educational demonstrations at the farmers' market. Reports from other sites suggest that the exhibit has similarly stimulated public programs as well as interest in collecting local traditions. Many of the sites reported that *Key Ingredients* brought in numerous volunteers and larger, more enthusiastic audiences than usual and that the food theme provided an entry for a number of individuals who otherwise rarely frequent the exhibit's host sites.

(It is worth mentioning that the Michigan Humanities Council created a Web site to accompany *Key Ingredients* and their own Michigan foodways exhibit; the Web site can be found at <http://www.michiganfoodways.org>. Further, folklorist Robbie Cogwell reports to us that Humanities Tennessee also created a Web site featuring *Key Ingredients*; that site can be found at <http://tn-humanities.org/community/exhibits/americanbyfood.php>.)

Exhibits have their limitations, especially traveling exhibits that are restricted in size. Although not without its problems, *Key Ingredients* is highly successful in its exploration of American identity through food. It effectively presents the complexity of American foodways and explores the nuances with which food constructs, represents, and negotiates individual, communal, and national identities. It also forcefully presents new ways to think about food, to recognize it as an aesthetic, social, and political phenomenon. Ultimately, this exhibit contributes to public discourse on what it means to eat as an American. Rather than restricting that discourse to nutritionists, policy-makers, markets, and elite consumers, the ex-

hibit calls for recognition of other voices in that discourse. Is it too celebratory? In some ways, yes. It could more fully challenge people to consider the downside of food traditions. However, the first step in understanding a food culture is to create awareness that food can be meaningful beyond its nutritional and economic values. In that, this exhibit is very successful.

Iowa Place-based Foods. Iowa Arts Council in cooperation with the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture. Developed by Rachele H. Saltzman. This is an online exhibit, which is available at http://www.iowaartscouncil.org/programs/folk-and-traditional-arts/place_based_foods.

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As people around the world increasingly use the Internet as their library, news source, entertainment, and personal diary, food has emerged there as a popular topic. Numerous sites offer recipes, culinary histories, restaurant reviews, accounts of “weird” food experiences, personal blogs, and other formats devoted to food topics. It is a delight and something of a relief, then, to see a Web site that is not only interesting, reliable, well-written, and well-documented, but also developed by a folklorist. *Iowa Place-Based Foods* by Rachele (Riki) H. Saltzman illustrates key folklore concepts and folkloristic approaches to research, analysis, and public programming of food for anyone with access to the Internet.

Folklife coordinator of the Iowa Arts Council, Saltzman also directed the *Iowa Place-Based Foods Project*, in which she conducted extensive fieldwork with farmers, food producers, and consumers throughout the state. This ethnographic documentation is the “meat” of the Web site, and it is framed by solid folklore scholarship on regional identity, tourism, and foodways theory, making the Web site more than just informational. Rather than attempting to define Iowa as a region or simply identifying the foods of the state, the site focuses on “place-based foods,” those that “have a unique taste related to the soil, water, air, and climate of a

region as well as with the ethnic or regional heritage of their producers” (http://www.iowaartscouncil.org/programs/folk-and-traditional-arts/place_based_foods/index.htm, accessed June 10, 2008). Through this definition, the site also addresses contemporary ecological and economic issues and demonstrates how a folkloristic perspective contributes to understanding (and perhaps resolving) those issues.

The project behind the Web site is itself unusual in its cross-disciplinarity and its combination of humanities scholarship, agricultural practice, and economic development. Saltzman worked closely with the Iowa-based Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, which, according to the vision statement on its Web site, “explores and cultivates alternatives that secure healthier people and landscapes in Iowa and the nation” (<http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/about/leopoldcenter.htm>, accessed June 10, 2008). The center focuses on a range of areas, including marketing, ecology, policy, the sponsoring of research and outreach through education, programming, and publications. Although the *Iowa Place-Based Foods* Web site is part of that outreach, it includes material from sources in both the public and private sectors. Quotations from people working in tourism, economic development, government, education, and farming give voice to this variety.

Iowa Place-Based Foods is very user-friendly. It has a reasonable amount of text, good images, some wonderful audio clips from interviews, and clearly marked subsections. The site’s main page offers concise and accessible descriptions of the project, but it also provides links to longer reports, so that individual readers can go into more depth as they wish. It also provides links to the other six pages, allowing the reader to browse at will.

The “Foods at a Glance” section offers “Visual Overview of Iowa Place-based Foods,” listing iconic foods of Iowa and giving a photograph, description, and brief history of each. Included are Maasdam sorghum, Maytag blue cheese, pork tenderloin, both rhubarb wine and dandelion wine from the Amana Colonies, K&K popcorn, mettwurst, Dutch letters pastry, kringla, Meskwaki maple syrup and black wal-