



**Benjamin A. Wurgaft and Merry I. White.- *Ways of Eating: Food through History and Culture* (California: University of California Press, 2023), 256p.**

From the dawn of civilization to the present day, food has been more than sustenance; it is a language of love, an identity marker, and a point of intersections of cultures. As the German proverb wisely states, ‘the way to a person’s heart is through their stomach,’ emphasizing the profound emotional and social significance of food as a way of expressing love and affection. The evolution of food and foodways have been shaped by factors such as globalization, migration, and technological advancements, leading to a rich tapestry of culinary diversity. From ancient rituals to modern fusion cuisines, the ever-changing landscape of food culture offers insights into the dynamic nature of human civilization. This refers to the fact that culture cannot be seen as an isolated force independent of other influences, since the world has always been marked by “travelling cultures,” to use Geertz Clifford’s concept. This cultural hybridity is formed through a number of processes, such as cross-cultural borrowings and intercultural fusion and blending that create hybridized cultural forms. In his *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, Jean-Fran ois Bayart (1996) says that mint tea, the immemorial ritual of Moroccan sociability, was introduced to the Moroccans by the English in the eighteenth century and became a substitute beverage during the economic crisis of 1874-84, finally, becoming the national drink. In the early 1600s, Pope Clement VIII was urged to prohibit coffee due to its Islamic origins, which some viewed as anti-Christian. However, after tasting it, he said, “this Satan’s drink is delicious. We shall fool Satan by baptizing it and making it a truly Christian beverage” (Wurgaft and White 6). This means that many dishes and drinks have eventually become domesticated into national culinary repertoires. The implication here is that food and ways of eating have been changing through history and therefore a talk on authentic culinary heritage is untenable especially in this expanded form of globalization. This idea is adequately investigated and clearly explained in Benjamin A. Wurgaft and Merry I. White’s latest book, *Ways of Eating: Food through History and Culture* (2023).

Benjamin A. Wurgaft and Merry I. White’s *Ways of Eating: Food Through History and Culture* delves into the realms of food anthropology, history, and studies. Each plate of food serves as a convergence of natural and human histories, reflecting desires and appetites that shape our lives and

express our cultural and social roots. The book digs into the intricate relationship between food and colonialism, highlighting how migration, invasion, and trade have historically infused cuisines with diverse influences. It unfolds as a journey through time, tracing the evolution of food practices from the dawn of agriculture to the complexities of the twenty-first century. Through nine historical chapters and cultural vignettes, the book surveys key concepts from cultural anthropology and history, illuminating the multifaceted meanings embedded within food practices and beliefs. It serves as a reminder that culinary customs are dynamic, capable of evolving and adjusting over time, despite our tendency to feel uncertain about changes and cling to ideas of what constitutes traditional or authentic cuisine. For Wurgaft and White, the book invites readers to be curious about food, and to think about food in new ways. They delve into the relationship between food and nature, emphasizing the impact of social, religious, and cultural norms on culinary traditions. They explore food's role as a social marker, reflecting social status and cultural identity. Through engaging stories, they trace the evolution of culinary practices in ancient civilizations like Rome, Japan, and Venice, highlighting the diversity and richness of food culture. The authors also analyze the historical and contemporary dynamics of global food trade, discussing how it shapes local cuisines and cultural practices.

From the agricultural revolution to the modern industrial food complex, each chapter of Wurgaft and White's book unveils a new layer of understanding, revealing how food both reflects and shapes the world in which we live. The book consists of nine chapters and vignettes. The first chapter, titled "Nature and Culture in the Origins of Agriculture," explores the close connection between humans and the environment in the development of agriculture. It emphasizes agriculture as humanity's initial effort to manipulate nature for its benefit, highlighting the reciprocal relationship between culture and food production techniques. The chapter also discusses foodways as a symbolic system reflecting cultural values and investigates the domestication of plants and animals. Furthermore, it examines the socio-political implications of agricultural practices and factors contributing to agricultural success, shedding light on the profound impact of agriculture on human societies and cultures. This idea can also be found in Terry Eagleton's *The Idea of Culture* (2000) when he claims that culture is derived from the latin root, "colere," which means to cultivate the land and hence culture was initially associated with agriculture or husbandry. The second chapter, "Staple Empire of the Ancient World," talks about the intimate relationship between food and colonialism, exploring the integral role of staple foods in shaping the identities and power dynamics of ancient empires like Persia, Rome, and China. Each empire relied on specific grains, such as wheat and rice, which not only sustained populations but also

reflected cultural distinctions and imperial control. The chapter discusses how staple crops facilitated economic and political dominance, highlighting their movement across empires and their symbolic significance. Additionally, it examines the cultural exchanges and culinary traditions within these empires, illustrating the spread of Roman and Chinese food cultures across vast territories.

The third Chapter, “Medieval Tastes,” displays how factors such as travel, changes in land use, rural and urban dynamics, and advancements in agricultural techniques influenced medieval European cuisine. Despite the perception of medieval Europe as isolated, the chapter highlights the significant influence of non-European food cultures, particularly through the introduction of spices via land and sea routes. Spices incentivized trade, exploration, and economic development, albeit with consequences such as slavery and conquest. It also challenges the notion of authentic national cuisines, suggesting that they are myths shaped by historical and cultural factors. The fourth chapter, “The Columbian Exchange,” begins with the arrival of Europeans in the Americas, bringing with them new animal and plant species. This exchange of people, plants, and animals across the Atlantic led to profound changes in the diets and food cultures of both continents. The chapter highlights the significance of staple crops such as corn, beans, and squash for northern Native Americans and discusses the neglected influence of African food traditions on the Americas. Rice, in particular, emerged as a significant staple brought from Africa, with enslaved African people playing a crucial role in establishing rice cultivation in the New World. In the fifth chapter, “Social Beverages and Modernity,” Wurgaft and White point out the cultural significance of coffee, tea, and chocolate as beverages that have shaped modern social spaces and cultures outside traditional dining settings. Originating from distant lands, these beverages became intertwined with Europe’s colonial expansion, reflecting power dynamics and cultural exchange on a global scale. The chapter highlights tea’s association with hospitality and kindness, tracing its consumption history in England and discussing sugar’s transformative role in economic systems. It also delves into chocolate’s colonial origins and the political symbolism of coffee and tea, which became rallying points for resistance against authority, challenging traditional power structures and promoting free speech. Through these beverages, social gatherings became arenas for political discourse and cultural expression, sparking both admiration and opposition from rulers seeking to control public spaces.

The sixth chapter, “Colony and Curry,” presents the culinary impacts of modern European imperial expansion, focusing on the British, Dutch, and French cases. Despite their relatively short-lived empires compared to ancient Rome, modern European powers reshaped global eating habits through the

use of modern technology and widespread colonial influence. The chapter begins by examining the British case, where colonial operatives viewed their manner of eating and drinking as a civilizing influence, with the introduction of English tea as a sign of progress among the natives. Yet, Indian foodways gradually found their way into both Indian and British kitchens, with curries adapted to British tastes becoming popular. The chapter also discusses the French colonial occupation of North Africa, including Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, where North African staples like couscous influenced French colonial operatives' diets and later made their way back to France. The chapter highlights how colonial expansion reshaped global food cultures, leading to the hybridization and integration of diverse culinary traditions into European diets and culinary practices. The seventh chapter, "Food's Industrial Revolution," discusses the profound impact of industrialization on cooking and eating habits, originating in England and spreading globally. The emergence of restaurants and industrial processes revolutionized food production and preservation, expanding culinary possibilities and altering consumer tastes. Industrialization facilitated the globalization of food supply chains, leading to both increased agricultural productivity and a narrower range of staple foods consumed domestically.

The eight chapter, "Twentieth-Century Foodways, or Big Food and Its Discontents," explores the global shifts in food consumption and culinary practices, highlighting the widespread adoption of fast food and the Western diet in the developing world. Despite the influence of big food corporations, the diversity of foodways in the developed world has reached unprecedented levels, with access to a wide range of cuisines. Immigration to global hubs has facilitated the mixing of cuisines and the creation of new dishes, as migrants bring their culinary traditions with them. The chapter also examines colonial influences on food movements, illustrating how dishes like French baguette in Vietnam was transformed and made Vietnamese. The ninth chapter, "Ways of Eating," delves into Japanese food culture, examining its unique foodways and traditional dishes. It provides insights into the cultural significance of Japanese cuisine and the rituals surrounding food consumption. Through exploring various culinary practices and dishes, the chapter offers a deeper understanding of Japan's rich culinary heritage. The authors end their book by examining the advantages and disadvantages of industrial food production. For them, the future of food appears to be uncertain, primarily due to the climate crisis and the global proliferation of resource-intensive diets. Amidst this broad spectrum of environmental challenges, certain crops face imminent threats, potentially requiring consumers to forego beloved foods like bananas and cherished beverages such as coffee. The solution, the authors offer, is to proactively adjust our diets to reduce the long environmental impact of industrial agriculture.

It is important to discern that through their book Benjamin A. Wurgaft and Merry I. White have examined how historical events, migrations, and colonialism have shaped the way people eat. They have discussed the fusion of different culinary traditions, the impact of globalization on food cultures and how food choices and eating habits are closely tied to personal and cultural identities. They have also discussed how food can be used as a tool of colonialism, a form of resistance, cultural preservation, or assimilation. One of the criticisms that can be levelled to the book is that it is Eurocentric in the sense that it disproportionately focuses on European culinary traditions while neglecting to adequately address the rich diversity of food cultures from other regions, particularly the Arabo-Islamic world. Given the book's Eurocentric focus, there's a growing imperative to decolonize food studies and food anthropology, broadening perspectives to encompass diverse cultural narratives and experiences.

Despite its Eurocentric tendency, the book is a captivating exploration of food culture and its profound influence on societies throughout history. Through their book, Wurgaft and White skillfully navigate the complex interplay between food, culture, and identity, delivering a thought-provoking and enlightening read. One of the strengths of the book is its comprehensive approach. The authors delve into a wide range of topics, from traditional culinary practices and rituals to the impact of globalization and technological advancements on food culture. By examining food through different lenses, they provide a multidisciplinary perspective that enhances our understanding of the significance of food in society and how it connects us to our past, present, and future. Readers will certainly appreciate the authors' meticulous research and attention to detail. The book is filled with fascinating historical anecdotes, captivating narratives, and thought-provoking insights, making the book a worthwhile addition to the library of anyone intrigued by the intersection of food, history, and culture. Wurgaft and White's book is, indeed, an invaluable reference for scholars and students in the fields of cultural studies, postcolonial studies, food studies, food history and food anthropology.

**Abdelaziz El Amrani**  
Abdelmalek Essaâdi University  
Tétouan, Morocco