Book Review

The Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America

Andrew F. Smith, Editor. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. Cloth; two volumes; 1584 pages; \$250.

“A” is for adulteration. It is also for apple pie and airplane food. “B” is for Betty Crocker and biotechnology. Every letter of the deliciously didactic *Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America* informs us of the highs (space food) and the lows (deep-fried Twinkies) of American food and culinary history (be advised—they are not the same!). The pages teem with the excitement of discovery liberally seasoned with the joy of recognition; many friends from childhood’s pantry reside here. Whether one approaches this bountiful feast by flitting from one delicacy to another or perusing the detailed topic indices that whet the appetite for more, it is clear that public health, food, and drink are inextricably related and share an enduring, vibrant history. I heartily recommend that every member of the public health community, with Andrew Smith and his gustatory experts as guides, embark upon this insightful journey into the heart of America, through—what else?—its stomach.

American food history has a recurring theme of challenge met with ingenuity, followed by excess and unintended consequences. Great strides in public health could not have been achieved without monumental transformations of the food supply that first saved lives by providing disease-free nutrition and then threatened lives by encouraging over-consumption of calories, sugars, salt, and fats in highly processed foods. Consider the staff of life—bread. More specifically, sliced Wonder bread, an American creation touted at the 1933 World’s Fair that marries a national penchant for convenience with the modernity of adding back vitamins sacrificed in the milling of flour. What at first seemed to be a great boon for consumers led to a lifeless loaf detested by food connoisseurs. Nevertheless, a history of food in America cannot be a tome for food snobs; Velveeta warrants not just an entry, but three other mentions including a testament to its remarkable shelf life.

Indeed, the war against spoilage and the quest for increased profitability have driven many food developments that profoundly affect public health. Human survival depends upon the safe preservation of food—whether crossing the plains in a Conestoga filled with salted meats or feeding the troops with combat rations—and these innovations often wend their way into

daily diets. A perfect example is the Beech-nut company which, in its efforts to comply with strict New York food sanitation laws, offered consumers a clear view of its pure food in vacuum-packed glass jars that later became synonymous with baby food. The industrialization of baby food wrought a fundamental shift in the feeding of infants, driven in large part by marketing and advertising. The potential impact of advertising on public health is especially evident with soda, a drink that began as a “medicine” and is now increasingly viewed as a culprit in a litany of medical problems.

Nothing has exploded quite like the consumption of soda; Americans currently guzzle it down at the average rate of 52 gallons per year, dispensed not by soda jerks but most often from ubiquitous and decidedly less conversational vending machines. Smith chronicles how these silent sentinels first appeared on New York City subway platforms dispensing gum in 1888 and were soon supplying candy and peanuts, followed by cooled water in Dixie cups. The automat arrived next, providing “a nickel cup of coffee and a nourishing meal” amid the splendor of stained glass windows. The presence of vending machines in factories to feed war-time workers on 24-hour shifts paved the way for their placement in workplaces and schools. In the 1980s, most automats were converted to Burger Kings, which doesn’t warrant its own encyclopedia entry, but joins other familiar names in the discussion of fast food and its impact on the national diet and public health.

School food has a tremendous influence on the health of American children and carries the triple load of building strong bodies for national security, feeding minds to promote literacy, and stabilizing prices through the commodities food program. A charitable concept rooted in late 18th century Europe, the Children’s Aid Society of New York is credited with initiating the first U.S. program in 1853. It has been a political football ever since, pitting public health against slashed budgets and nutritionists against bureaucrats who famously anointed ketchup a vegetable. Milk, a huge component of school food programs, has long been the focus of public health: from the formaldehyde tinted blue milk of *The Jungle* to Pure Food Act protection; from the perfect food for healthful growth to the recognition of lactose intolerance in black, Asian, and Latin communities.

The current obesity crisis is subject to the same political forces that shaped the history of American

food and drink. The Department of Agriculture entry amply demonstrates that food subsidies are as important as hunger programs—whether they be settlement houses or Meals on Wheels—in determining the nation's diet. From a public health perspective, issues related to “drink” have long been socially and politically charged; the history of temperance and taverns, alcohol and teetotalism, and the ultimate experience with Prohibition, are fascinatingly recounted.

Obesity, however, has become a crisis across all income levels. Concern about overweight is not a new phenomenon. Even though we've been measuring girth on scales since 1891 and caloric values of food since 1894, status and fashion often dictated weight more than health considerations. It wasn't until life insurance company charts turned averages into ideals that diet mania began in earnest. Efforts currently underway to combat obesity have much of the food industry seeking to encourage healthful eating and become part of the solution. The success of their ingenuity in meeting this daunting challenge will have to be assessed in the *Encyclopedia's* second edition.

Food has a serious impact on public health and this is a serious encyclopedia. But it is also great fun to glean tidbits of information that may have escaped even the most dedicated foodie. Thus, we learn that Dr. Harvey Wiley, who championed pure food with the help of the poison squad, later established the Good Housekeeping Magazine Seal of Approval. He merits eight index entries. *The Joy of Cooking* warrants 10, albeit one of them is to disparage Velveeta, which, since it needs no refrigeration, was included in World War I troops' rations.

After digesting these and other food facts, make plans to attend one of the many food festivals listed in the *Encyclopedia* or to visit a conveniently catalogued food museum; the Tupperware collection in Florida might just be the perfect place to celebrate the diversity of American food and drink. Just like Tupperware, this two-volume set is destined for a long and useful shelf-life with no foreseeable expiration date.

Ellen J. Fried, JD, MA

Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity
at Yale University
ellen.fried@yale.edu