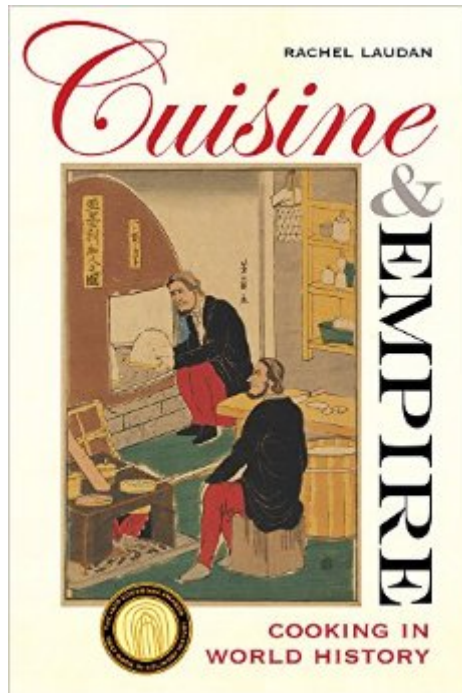


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Cuisine And Empire: Cooking In World History (California Studies In Food And Culture)



Synopsis

Rachel Laudan tells the remarkable story of the rise and fall of the world's great cuisines; from the mastery of grain cooking some twenty thousand years ago, to the present; in this superbly researched book. Probing beneath the apparent confusion of dozens of cuisines to reveal the underlying simplicity of the culinary family tree, she shows how periodic seismic shifts in 'culinary philosophy'—beliefs about health, the economy, politics, society and the gods—prompted the construction of new cuisines, a handful of which, chosen as the cuisines of empires, came to dominate the globe. *Cuisine and Empire* shows how merchants, missionaries, and the military took cuisines over mountains, oceans, deserts, and across political frontiers. Laudan's innovative narrative treats cuisine, like language, clothing, or architecture, as something constructed by humans. By emphasizing how cooking turns farm products into food and by taking the globe rather than the nation as the stage, she challenges the agrarian, romantic, and nationalistic myths that underlie the contemporary food movement. Â

Book Information

Series: California Studies in Food and Culture (Book 43)

Paperback: 488 pages

Publisher: University of California Press; Reprint edition (April 3, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0520286316

ISBN-13: 978-0520286313

Product Dimensions: 6 x 1.2 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.6 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 starsÂ Â See all reviewsÂ (25 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #130,980 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #201 inÂ Books > Cookbooks, Food & Wine > Cooking Education & Reference > History #1632 inÂ Books > Cookbooks, Food & Wine > Regional & International #4549 inÂ Books > History > World

Customer Reviews

Rachel Laudan has given us an important and ground-breaking book. There is profit in it for the general reader who is just curious about the main topic, cuisine; but also for more specialized readers of social history, philosophical anthropology, the history of ideas, and the sociology of religion. The farmer does not give us food. 'A sheaf of wheat is no more food,' she asserts, 'than a boll of cotton is a garment.' It is a major theme of the book that farming may give us

raw materials, but techniques (and importantly, ideas -- the culinary philosophy, as she has it) of cooking are what give us food. It is, thus, futile to go on about how natural this or that foodstuff may be; we no more tear meat from bone with our teeth than we use them to grind the grass seeds that became our corn (maize, or wheat, or whatnot). Human labor, and ingenuity, stand between Nature and dinner. (This is even true of raw foods.) Laudan suggests that, by definition, all food is processed food -- from developing the techniques of settled agriculture to the promotion (or prohibition) of certain foods according to ideas (nicely summarized in tables 1.1-1.5) about such things as the four humors, the four or five elements, maintaining harmony in the universe, and sacralty -- and, more recently, as the songwriter said, while *We Are Eating Foods for Health*. (Modern theories of health and diet turn out to be just the latest in a whole series of fashions which change with the checkered changes of ideas in science and cosmology, since Babylon as it were.) Food may be good to think, but in any case it is not just material fuel, it is a thing shaped by ideas and their changes.

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