

"how america eats" by jennifer jensen wallach

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In "How America Eats", author Jennifer Jensen Wallach attempts to make the argument that the choices of food that Americans make gives us a better picture as to how Americans define themselves. She argues that, since its inception during the colonial era, what it means to be American has changed throughout the country's history. As European settlers, indigenous Native Americans, and immigrants from Asia, Africa, South America, and more, begin to interact and coalesce over the span of two hundred years, and as technological advancements improve transportation and transportation, Wallach argues that the study of food ". . . yield(s) insights into a seemingly endless variety of other human behaviors". Her argument points towards defining moments in the United States' history, such as the lifespan of the African slave trade, and the industrial revolution that enabled the distinction between rural and urban living. She then demonstrates how food people ate and how they prepared them during the time was heavily influenced by those events, and how that food became staples of how Americans defined themselves.

Wallach attempts to synthesize historical research with her own observations to use as evidence to reveal food and agricultures ties to the developing country's social, political, and cultural climate. For example. she begins with the coming of the European settlers in 1690 to Plymouth, Massachusetts in her first chapter, "The Cuisine of Contact". She believes that, by observing the behavior of the Europeans and the natives, and how their culinary habits synthesized as they grew towards each other, we can see how their converging food culture ". . . led to the creation of a unique American

cuisine, one that was ultimately eaten by many with patriotism and pride. . .”.

She describes how the nature of the kinds of foods the Pilgrims could afford to take on the Mayflower, such as the hard bread known as the “‘ ship’s biscuits’”, caused bad malnourishment across the colonist population. This malnourishment ignited one of the most basic and primal human desires: the need for sustenance. The quest for this sustenance, which began when the colonists arrived on the mainland, eventually incited their first interaction with the natives when the colonists were compelled to steal one of their hidden stashes of corn in desperation. This negative interaction spelled out one of the many ways the settlers would benefit from the presence of the natives. Later interactions were beneficial, yet more amicable; natives provided support as helpful neighbors by introducing the settlers to different ways to work the land to ensure greater harvests and more varied eating.

However, the settlers had no intention of keeping relations peaceful with the natives. Events like the 1636 war against the Pequot Indians showed how the colonists would fight their neighbors not only for land expansion and religious regions, but to take corn preserves from the natives. Even with their good grace, the natives had no chance of sustaining a peaceful partnership with the colonists because of the fact that the colonists were desperate for food.

Historical evidence suggests that, even though the colonists sought out indigenous foods to prevent themselves from starving, they were reluctant to do so because they found the natives’ culinary lifestyle savage and

unappealing. Colonists found corn, as prevalent in the North and easy to grow as it was, unappealing as a new staple of their diet, as it would be a sort of admission that they were dependent on the natives. The first generation of the colonists had an ethnocentric worldview that crowned them the superior culture of the world, and adopting corn into their lifestyle would betray themselves. However, this continental-European ethnocentrism faded as new generations of colonists came to be, as well as the bias against corn as a staple of the American diet. As the colonies grew and natives were pushed further and further from the colonies population, . . . so [did] the corresponding English fear that the Native American foodstuffs might somehow transform Europeans into savages". Even though Pilgrims had substituted wheat bread for corn, corn made a resurgence as a useful, easy, and universally necessary crop throughout the colonies.

Wallach thinks that the study of what these people ate (and chose to eat) lends insight on the many defining events of that time. For one, we can find the influence of Native Americans on the common colonist diet when we observe how their culinary flagship crop was adopted by the colonists long after they were on amicable terms. With their desperation to survive in the New World, and how their cultural pride caused them to discriminate against such a useful resource like corn, we can also see the true intentions of the landers at Plymouth: they only desired to use and "befriend" the natives to survive and thrive, and nothing more. We also gain insight into the life of the natives, and how importantly practicality meant to them. Wallach argues that viewing this time through food and agriculture can give us these unique perspectives.

Wallach continues to demonstrate how food can be used to understand what Americans define themselves to be as she observes the dichotomy between the appropriation of ethnic cuisine and their subsequent oppression by mainland Americans. In Chapter Seven, " Food Habits and Racial Thinking", she highlights immigrant groups that settle in the United States in the nineteenth century, long after the United States had been established and claimed territory that encompassed the entire continent. She notes that, even though most immigrants faced prejudice when entering the United States, it seemed that ". . . both the food and the people from white ethnic groups were adopted more readily than those of people of color". One example of a non-white ethnic group being discriminated against were the Chinese, who began to enter the United States during the 1850s to work dangerous jobs on the West Coast, like work in mines and railroads. Americans viewed the Chinese unfavorably, and felt disgusted by what the Chinese ate. For the most part, whites avoided early eating at Chinese food establishments.

The Chinese, being poor immigrants, did not have the luxury of being choosy about what and where they ate; they often lacked the necessary ingredients to remake authentic Chinese meals. They also were forced to appeal to the taste palates of the Americans in order to make money to survive by changing both the decorations and recipes of what they made. As they did so, and as Americans became more accustomed to their Chinese neighbors settling it, Americans became more interested in Chinese cuisine. However, Wallach argues that the Americans ". . . found it possible to simultaneously enjoy the food and disdain the people whose cultural creation it was". Like

the Native Americans during the colonial days, they also found a sort of dominance by making their culinary habits distinct from the Chinese. Foods like chop suey are representative of the American culture dominated immigrant and other minority groups, forcing the minority culture to assimilate into American culture. The Chinese were still the victim of widespread discrimination, ranging from unfair rumors and slander about their diners and culture, to full-on legally enforced exclusion by Congress in the 1900s. Yet, whites still found joy in indulging in Chinese cuisine. Wallach argues that the phenomenon that allows whites to accept Chinese cuisine, yet still practice bigotry towards the people gives us greater insight towards the attitudes of both the Chinese and whites during the time. Wallach also extends this observation to other minority groups, like Mexicans and African Americans.

Even though having a multicultural cuisine and equal respect for one's neighbors seems like they hand-in-hand, Wallach argues that history proves this is not the case. It seems that Americans, from the natives to now, would be generally accepting of widening their culinary diet, yet reluctant to respect, understand, and live the experiences of minority cultures. Wallach believes that following historical foodways leads us to the fact that in mainstream America, a unique country where many cultures converged at once, is reluctant to give respect to lesser cultures, yet take what they want from their culture anyway. This is one of many conclusions she finds in her book, the most prominent one being that food is an essential factor that allows us to understand historical trends and behaviors that define Americans today.

Step Three: Decide if you believe the book's position.

I believe that Wallach demonstrates in her book very well that learning American history through food leads us to some interesting insights about America and mainstream American culture. It places context into the motivations of actions made by Americans, from the Pilgrims to more recent people, and it is also informative as to how some societal conflicts have never ended since their inception long ago. For example, the fact that the Pilgrims abstained from engaging in the native's culinary culture when they no longer needed to shows how aggressive and dominant they wanted themselves to be. That kind of thinking was still present, and spread to the West Coast, generations later, when whites refused to acknowledge the Chinese and their culture, yet appropriate their cuisine. Taken alone, these instances stand out both as not only being negative, but unusual. However, though Wallach's book, one could understand that the palate is far less discriminatory than the mind; mainstream American culture views minority cultures as spectacles, rather than neighbors that deserve equal respect. That view might not be as intense as it was before in history, yet reminders of that time still remain.

I would say that Wallach's methods are an example of an effective way to teach U. S. history. Tracing major historical events year by year, memorizing presidents and their notable actions, and studying statistics of the times does give an objective understanding of history, but perhaps not an informative one. It is my belief that studying history is important because it affects how we act today and in the future. Therefore, one way of trying to solve societal issues of today is to look for parallels in the past. There are <https://assignbuster.com/how-america-eats-by-jennifer-jensen-wallach/>

very few lessons one can derive from looking back at history when they do not understand the motivations of certain actions. Knowing that whites discriminated against the natives, Chinese, Mexicans, and African Americans is not useful for me, because I have nothing to do with that information besides knowing it. However, when I understand that mainstream American culture is indiscriminate towards foods, it gives me some insight as to why they would discriminate: not only do Americans desire to taste good food, but they also desire to be dominant. I then understand that introducing foreign peoples to Americans will probably not end well for the foreigners, as long as their relationship is not mutually beneficial. Now, when America is faced with incoming refugees, I might be able to predict the unfortunate outcome of their arrival. An objective observation of history would not be able to give me that insight. Wallach's methods are a much more personal and grounded way of viewing history, and because of it, I think it is a useful way of understanding history.