

Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

Review of:

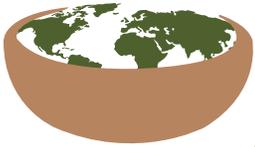
Food Cults: How Fads, Dogma, and Doctrine Influence Diet

Kima Cargill, ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Studies in Food and Gastronomy, 2017. Pp. 252, index, contributors.

By: Tallen Sloane

Food Cults: How Fads, Dogma, and Doctrine Influence Diet, edited by Kima Cargill, is a comprehensive volume of essays that document and analyze fringe communities of extreme eaters' ideologies and behaviors throughout the world. These communities are defined as cults in the broadest sense of the term to encompass a spectrum of exclusive fringe food movements that leverage promises based in cultural fears. From juicing and elective restrictive diets to media-fueled gluttony and marijuana categorized as a vegetable, essay topics in *Food Cults* demonstrate the dynamism of community eating rituals and reveal the fleeting promises of longevity, fertility, happiness, thinness, and countless other cultural ideals that perpetuate cult belief. Researchers, folklorists, mental health professionals, and omnivores intrigued by socio-cultural analyses of polarizing attitudes towards our foodscape would benefit from this collection. Additionally, open-minded raw-food vegans, ardent juicers, paleo lifestylers, gluten-free advocates, sourdough fermenters, and cooking fanatics would find this collection pleasurable, if sometimes challenging, due to the authors' invitations to question cult rhetorics.

Cargill, a psychologist whose expertise lies in uncovering deceptive techniques that the pharmaceutical industry utilizes to promote consumption of their products, subtextually reveals her critical background throughout the compilation. Her introduction synthesizes the broad expanse of food communities by providing an inclusive definition for the term "cult," so often misconstrued with the likes of the Jonestown, Guyana, American Peoples Temple Agricultural Project cult and such other notorious groups. Cargill sees cults as serving as communities to "explore the mechanisms of group and individual identity, the distortion of nutritional science, the ways in which food behaviors express our anxieties, and how dietary practices organize us



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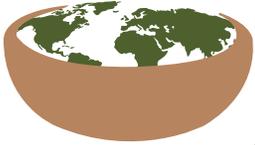
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psychologically” (3). The first collection to bring together various works on fringe food communities throughout time and space, *Food Cults* offers readers a fascinating insight into commonalities across these groups.

As important as the definition is for the compilation’s coherence, the essays within demonstrate the fantastic power of small group collective anxieties, ritual practices, and identity politics. Each of *Food Cults*’ fifteen ethnographic and analytical essays invites readers to delve into the mindset of a specific group’s members. The essays are organized from the philosophical and cerebral, such as “The Psychology of Food Cults” (Cargill), to the historical, such as “Food Practiced in Early Christianity” (Brazinski), and then segues into the restrictive and contemporary, “Juicing: Language, Ritual, and Placebo Sociality in a Community of Extreme Eaters” (Veissière and Gibbs-Bravo) and “Contemporary Superfood Cults: Nutritionism, Neoliberalism, and Gender” (Sikka), for example, ending with a macrocosmic, global view of how communities define food, specifically good food, such as in “Herb Is for the Healing of the Nation!’: Marijuana as a Consumable Vegetable among Ghetto Muslim Youth of Maamobi in Accra, Ghana” (Botchway and Prempeh).

The collection’s central focus concerns how these cults form identity around collective anxiety, group dogma, and belief generated within a specific group. For example, in “Of Bananas and Cavemen: Unlikely Similarities between Two Online Food Communities” (Maxfield and Rissing), fruitarians and primal dieters find common ground in legitimizing “dietary choices and . . . pursuit of a lean, muscular bodily aesthetic,” while both groups’ manipulation of science in the quest for “one true diet” asserts moral superiority over each other even though they cite the same theory (141).

Researchers seeking a grounded counterpoint to online forums and social media would deeply benefit from this carefully chosen collection of essays about exclusive food attitudes and actions that are culturally entrenched and globally enacted. Former and current food cult members might recognize behaviors in these pages that challenge their chosen doctrine. Folklorists interested in small-group dynamics, the evolution of religion, secular ritual, and identity politics would find this compilation fascinating. Omnivores, cookbook aficionados, culinary historians, and librarians interested in diversifying their food literature would benefit from this set of social criticism. Mental health practitioners working with extreme eaters or loved ones who are concerned about extreme eating behaviors could find this a helpful addition to their library. While not an overt critique of individual cults’ ideologies, *Food Cults* introduces a healthy



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dose of skepticism and critical review to the complicated conversation about healthy bodies and healthy communities.