

Digest

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Review of:

American Home Cooking: A Popular History

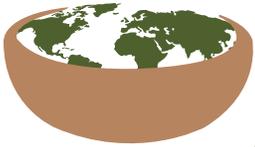
Tim Miller. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Studies in Food and Gastronomy, 2017. Pp. vii + 199, acknowledgments, index, bibliography, note on author.

By: Charles Camp

American Home Cooking is the latest of a growing number of books that provide an introduction to the scholarship of American foodways, and a good starting place for students and scholars relatively unfamiliar with the subject area. Its specifics will be apparent to anyone reading *American Home Cooking* for that purpose: the author begins his story abruptly with the year 1800 and ends with a brief and somewhat mysterious chapter devoted to “The Future of Home Cooking.” The bounds set by the author may recommend it to newcomers, but readers will note that excising the “Future” chapter from this history book leaves a text 172 pages long—considerably less than might be expected for a work with so broad a title.

In fact, *American Home Cooking* is a kind of bibliographic essay that will perform the valuable function of introducing readers to some of the American sources that foodways scholars employ. With just 97 citations in the bibliography, it is clear that *American Home Cooking* is at best an introduction to the “Popular History” of the recent past in its subtitle rather than a structured survey or guide to basic sources. Unfortunately, among the research and published scholarship that the author overlooks is everything that has contributed to foodways scholarship from the social sciences and folklife studies. It might be fair to say, no sleight intended to the academic study of history, that *American Home Cooking* is an introduction to American foodways of primary value to students enrolled in courses offered by history departments.

My objective here is not to place the foodways research and publication of folklorists atop a pyramid of scholarship, nor to suggest divisions where alliances have been recently wrought with an ever-expanding range of disciplines. Rather, I read *American Home Cooking* with an eagerness to



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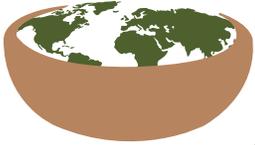
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discover what a new generation of historians had to offer to existing historical thinking about foodways and opportunities for future collaboration. But despite the fact that a little less than half of the book is devoted to the years from 1945 to the present, no living home cook is present. Instead, the sources for the author's narrative are as bibliographically indebted to the living as the dead. What occurs in the second half of the book essentially aligns with the first three chapters, which are based upon what historians have said about the foodways of the past. I can respect the consistency of this approach, but I am puzzled by the author's seeming indifference to the tens of millions of home cooks in their kitchens, stretching from his front door and reaching out coast-to-coast.

The fact is that what is absent in *American Home Cooking* is "Home" and "Cooking," a method for stitching the present and the future to the past, and an invitation for students to develop a degree of attentiveness that bridges scholarship and first-hand observation. Such a recalculation does not require a new generation of fieldwork guides, just some encouragement. I won't quibble with the author's claim that increasing numbers of kitchens have come to be deployed to warm up leftovers and/or transform carry-out food into a momentary buffet. But these occurrences have not displaced home cooks, nor should they deflect attention from them. Here's the irony: the phrase "home cook" may have become an odd mutation of "home cooking:" i.e., a home cook is a person engaged in home cooking. And I don't know what sort of census standard we might employ if we wanted to know whether home cooks are waxing or waning in the 21st century. But I would be reluctant to make characterizations of such people, or worse, projections that forecast their numbers or vitality in the future without speaking to a few of them.

I'm not sure why *American Home Cooking* seems to lack the human touch that so many scholars and students from the varied disciplines drawn to this culture area have found essential to the study of American foodways. From the perspective of folklorists in the past half century who have come to incorporate cooks and cooking in their research, foodways has meant many things, including an escape from the esoterica of less common cultural practices. But foodways also offers a way back to those and myriad other expressive forms.

But before I conclude, let me give credit to Tim Miller's work. He shows considerable skill in tracing the changes wrought in American society during World War I and, especially, World War II. I don't know a better telling of difficult stories, made all the more important by the dwindling ranks of Americans who fought those wars on the battlefield and the home front. We



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all need to work harder to make sure the kitchen stories of those generations
nourish the present, and the future.