

Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

Review of:

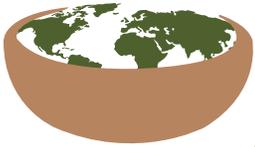
As Long As We Both Shall Eat: A History of Wedding Food and Feasts

Claire Stewart, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. Pp. 231, bibliography, index, photographs.

By: Cherry Levin

Despite the rather clever title of Stewart's book, *As Long As We Both Shall Eat: A History of Wedding Food and Feasts*, this book does not deliver for readers interested in a clear and detailed exploration of wedding feasts. This quasi-academic treatment of a ritual meal presents material in an overly broad manner and moves rapidly in a non-cohesive style through time and place with examples appropriated from medieval Europe and the United States, entirely overlooking any connection with Greco-Roman practices in our inherited wedding traditions.¹ For example, a brief segment on US wartime rationing is entitled "World War II and Food Porn" (15). The material meanders through a maze of irrelevant facts, reading more like a current edition of *People Magazine's* celebrity wedding books and equally frivolous online publications with Stewart's flair for the dramatic revealed by her focus on extraneous yet humorous stories such as a legendary prank involving munchkins played on Jimmy Stewart at his bachelor party (36).

Stewart's stated approach to her book is that food and drink served at a wedding celebration reflect the social status of the hosts yet she is unable to give concrete examples or consistent evidence of her claim. Information relating to this focus does not appear until chapter 6: "Chicken or Beef?: Choice of Entrees" where Stewart's chapter headings cover religious groups. Yet under the heading "Mormonism" there is no mention of the food served at a Mormon wedding. The same holds true in a section on "Seventh Day Adventists," whose belief system is represented as one that "espouses healthful living." Stewart's only comment is that, as a group, Adventists "do not consume meat or seafood" and "their wedding receptions do not include alcohol or caffeinated drinks" (66). The section on "Islamists" does offer a modicum of information focused on acceptable foods (halal) in contrast to the unacceptable meats (haram),



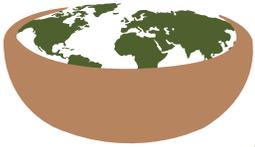
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yet only a photograph of an Afghan wedding feast depicts the foods actually served, which are difficult to determine from the image. Moreover, the sections on Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists describe wedding practices without noting the actual foodways involved. Exactly how does the company Have Trunk Will Travel, which makes possible the entrance of the groom on an elephant or horse (69), pertain to Hindu wedding *feasts*? In the section on ethnic groups, Stewart includes a segment entitled “Restraint” which she ascribes to the attempt by home economists between 1901 and 1922 to “homogenize” the ingredients of immigrant food. This short section is followed by an extremely capsulized discussion of Jewish immigration and dietary laws with literally no discussion of any food choices for a Jewish wedding feast. Is there chopped liver or not?

Additionally, Stewart’s selection of shark fin soup as an indicator of prosperity in Chinese American weddings is garbled, and it is unclear whether “the flourishing Chinese economy of the 1990’s” (88) that she mentions relates to regions of Mainland China, Hong Kong, or New York City’s Chinatown, as all are mentioned in the breath of two paragraphs. Also in her chapter 8 discussion of shark fin soup, Stewart essentializes ethnic differences by comparing ways in which other immigrants from Palestine, Italy, Mexico, Japan, Korea, Greece, and Germany use weddings to celebrate, as she argues, “affirmation that the country of origin has not been forgotten” (89). Again, there is no description or naming of which specific foods served at the wedding feast might accomplish this assimilative process. There is, however, a tribute to “[m]any Americans” who use food-related “racial and ethnic insults” by referencing “krauts, frogs, limeys and fish heads” to mark a changing American landscape (97).

Much could be done with the topic of selecting the menu for a wedding feast. Recent “fusion” weddings, the marriage of a couple from distinctly different ethnic backgrounds, can be a rich source of material on how foodways from each culture may be incorporated into a menu that honors both cultures. Wedding industry professionals in the contemporary US must be aware of food taboos or even something as simple as allergies. Today, an American couple selecting the menu for their wedding feast has a staggering number of choices that will be reflected in the food and beverages they choose to serve. Their choice is indicated in their personal preference in how to spend the money in their budget. This consists of such factors as their venue selection, their unique understanding and celebration of their heritage and ethnicity and whether food will be a highlight of their wedding day. Gone are the days when the bride’s father paid for the wedding. Most couples today pay for a large part of their wedding themselves and must negotiate their spending on what is important to



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them. Is it a great band, a couture dress, a premium open bar, a fabulous venue, or high-end photography and videography? Somewhere in these fundamental decisions, the topic of meal selection does occur but, unlike Stewart's claim, for most couples this is not a way chiefly to "proclaim their affluence by serving extravagant food" (21). Nor do these millennials "spend an enormous amount of time 'plotting' the meal to be served on their wedding day" (21). They will, however, take into careful consideration what food they choose to serve, how it is served, and whom they choose to serve it.

(Notes)

1 See Edward Westermarck, *History of Human Marriage*, 5 ed., Vol. 1 and 2: 432-595 (New York: Allerton Book Co., 1922); George P. Monger, *Marriage Customs of the World: From Henna to Honeymoons* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2004); Simon R. Charlsey, *Wedding Cakes and Cultural History* (London: Routledge, 1992); Roy C. Wood, *The Sociology of the Meal: Food and Social Theory, Sociologies of Domestic Dining, Dining Out Theory, Meals and Society* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995); John Cordy Jeaffreson, *Brides and Bridals*, Vol. 1 (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1872); and Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell, *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984).