

Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

Review of:

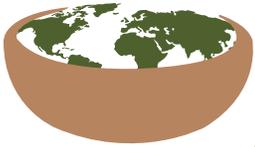
Rio de Janeiro: A Food Biography

Marcia Zoladz. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Press, 2016. Pp. xi + 116, introduction, notes, bibliography, index.

By: Susan Eleuterio

Part of the Big City Food Biographies Series,¹ *Rio de Janeiro* begins with author Marcia Zoladz's note that "the food in the city . . . is also part of the history of its cultural development" (vii). She first outlines the evolutionary interplay of indigenous Amerindian food and methods (cassava for flour, tapirs as meat, and the *moqué*m, a grilling technique used for drying and smoking food) with Portuguese colonial introductions such as rice, sugarcane, chickens, cattle, and later coffee. Next she presents the impact of Africans forced into slavery and brought to Rio and Brazil with their fish dishes, *angu*, a corn flour porridge served with offal in a stew, and foods featuring introduced ingredients like peanuts, along with local ingredients like capsicum peppers, pumpkins, and black beans. Finally she looks at the post slavery period and contributions from European and Levantine immigrants like pizza, kibbeh, pasta, and French cuisine in restaurants and wealthier homes. She notes that Cariocas (the name for native born Rio inhabitants including herself) "have a dual perception . . . on one hand, there is a . . . strong idea of their city as an idyllic place in a special landscape . . . on the other hand, Rio is open to all and any foreign influence in food . . . and each new addition is adapted to the Brazilian culture" (x).

Rio de Janeiro moves from this useful outline of the peoples and periods of food history and culture in Rio to a slightly encyclopedic listing of material resources, the first inhabitants, later immigration, markets and retailing, restaurants and eating out, concluding with historic cookbooks—covering the same topics as the other volumes in the Series. For every fascinating section, however, there is, at times, almost too much information (with some facts repeated unnecessarily), which can overwhelm a reader just when she is getting interested. "A Small Glossary of Things Everybody Knows in Rio," for example provides insider knowledge on the African roots of *à baina* or ingredients and methods from the northeast state of Bahia, the three types of limes (called *limão* or lemon



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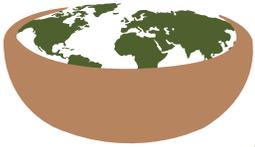
in Portuguese) used in Rio, a fish/seafood stew *moqueca* made with palm oil in a large shallow pot, and the role of *quitandeiras* or women who sell fruits, vegetables, cakes, hot puddings, or doughnuts (and sometimes biscuits) on large wooden boards (28-29)

To be sure, Zoladz provides a thorough and sophisticated analysis not only of the foodways of Rio, but of the historic and ongoing intersectionality of people, politics, and cultures. Describing the impact of immigration, she includes not only the specific foods now available in Rio, but also detailed descriptions and histories of methods of preparation, presentation, and a variety of dishes, concluding with current cooking shows on television. She covers how successive waves of immigrants (Germans, Swiss, French, Chinese, Jews and non-Jews from Eastern and Central Europe, Japanese, and Middle Easterners, among others) both changed what was available in the city but also had their food customs modified by what was available and the traditions of the Cariocas. She notes: “In Rio, there is a tendency to cultural dilution in the kitchen . . . a constant dialogue with the tropical climate and ingredients [*sic*] availability” (39).

Author of an award-winning cookbook of Brazilian sweets and desserts, Zoladz includes recipes and what appear to be family stories. My favorite is the description of preparing a turkey for Christmas by getting it drunk on *cachaça* (fermented sugarcane liquor) making sure that it was “not under any stress when the cook came by and broke its neck” (77).

The style of most later chapters is that of oral history, in the author’s dialect idiom, not conversational in tone, and sometimes a bit jumpy in time and place, but very dedicated to providing an on the ground view of foodways from field to market to kitchen to table. For me as a Portuguese American, there were flashes of recognition in some traditions such as Sunday being the “day to prepare *cozido*, a Portuguese specialty where meats and vegetables are cooked in different broths,” which reminds me of the stews my father would make on Sundays, and the love of sugary desserts such as *pudim de leite*, “a milk custard covered with a caramel sauce, a variation of the Portuguese flan” (88).

This volume’s overview of historic cookbooks is fascinating, including the facts that sweets were typically prepared in monasteries or convents or by poor widows to make money (105). Zoladz does an equally excellent job of sprinkling descriptions and recipes of the typical (and in some cases, unique) dishes of Rio, for instance, *feijoada*, black beans and rice (today served with meat), *farofa*, a



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“well seasoned mix of manioc flour, eggs, thinly sliced onions [*sic*] rings, green kale finely shredded, and a little bacon cut in tiny pieces” (43), codfish, and wonderfully named specialties such as *casadinho* (“roughly ‘sweetly married’ two cookies joined together with guava paste or milk marmalade that can be bought at street markets,” which she notes is an “informal version of the *bem-casado* (‘well married’) cookies wrapped in fancy paper and given as a treat at weddings” (105).

While the list of cookbooks and bibliography is extensive, I found it odd that sweeping statements were made with little or no reference to sources except in a few cases. While this book is aimed at a popular audience, it would still have been useful to have links to the source material. Otherwise, this food biography provides a deeply researched and, at the same time, an intimate look at the historic and contemporary foodways of Rio.

(Notes)

1 Other cities include Madrid, New Orleans, San Francisco, New York, Portland, Chicago, and Kansas City