

Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

Review of:

Ethnic American Food Today: A Cultural Encyclopedia and Ethnic American Cooking: Recipes for Living in a New World.

Lucy Long, ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015. Pp. 760, index, maps, bibliography per entry; Lucy Long, ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. Pp. 358, index, maps.

By: Claire Schmidt

Lucy Long's two-volume encyclopedia, *Ethnic American Food Today: A Cultural Encyclopedia*, and the companion cookbook, *Ethnic American Cooking: Recipes for Living in a New World*, represent an enormous amount of collaborative and multi-disciplinary work. The fascination and respect for the relationship of food and culture is clear on every page. Enthusiastic cooks and students of culture can immerse themselves in the wealth of details and insider knowledge collected from scholars and cooks around the world.

The central argument of the encyclopedia's introduction is that food and ethnicity are irrevocably intertwined, neither is static, and both involve politically charged choices (as well as lack of choice). Food can be both a window into history and a mirror that reflects and responds to difference (Long 2015:9). The introduction defines the terms crucial to the endeavor—ethnicity, American, and food—drawing on Elliot Oring, Warren Belasco, and Don Yoder.

The encyclopedia is organized alphabetically by ethnic group, as is the cookbook. The entries in the encyclopedia are written by a wide variety of people, including food



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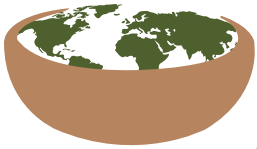
scholars, folklorists, graduate students, chefs, home cooks, and food enthusiasts.

While they vary in length and detail, each entry follows a consistent format. After the name of the ethnic group or nation and the global region (often with cross-references to entries for related food cultures), the entry usually contains a “background” section. The background gives information on historical and social immigration, settlement, and assimilation patterns. Sometimes the background section includes information on regional, religious, or linguistic diversity within the ethnic group (see “Nepal”), or etymology of group names (see “Pennsylvania Dutch”). In other cases, the background section draws on personal experience narratives of the authors of the entries or collaborators who assisted in the research process (see “Czechoslovakia”).

The next section, “Foodways,” explains staple foods and essential ingredients in that particular ethnic cuisine. If traditional ingredients are not available, this section often lists substitutions. This section often describes daily patterns of food production, purchase, preparation, and consumption.

Many entries include a “Holiday Feasts” section that focuses on the ways ethnic food heritage may be performed during national or cultural holidays (see, for example, “Denmark”). Most entries include a section on “Place in American Culture,” which identifies and explicates the role of particular ethnic foodways in mainstream American culture. Some entries include a section on “Noted Restaurants and Chefs,” and all entries close with a section titled “Further Reading” which lists bibliographic entries for scholarly articles, websites, blogs, articles, and other encyclopedias.

Most encyclopedia entries include one or two recipes, often for a staple food (such as Tanzanian Ugali) or for a food that has become particularly emblematic in ethnic restaurants (such as Pad Thai) or during American holidays (such as Danish Butter Cookies). Some recipes, like Chinese-American turkey congee, demonstrate the focus on how “Americans



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claiming an ethnic heritage or identity are eating today” (Long 2015:9).

Entries range in length; the entry “Peru” occupies five pages and “Turkey” is ten pages, while “Qatar” occupies one page. In the introduction, Long writes that entry length ideally reflects the impact that the specific ethnic group has had on American food culture; but length is also determined by quality and availability of documentation, as European ethnic foodways have been studied vigorously in the United States but African foodways have not.

Two issues made the encyclopedia less effective than it might have been; some of the maps are hard to read, both in the encyclopedia and in the cookbook. Some are beautifully clear but others, due to the file resolution, are nearly unreadable. In terms of ease of use, it would also have been helpful if the encyclopedia included the letter of the alphabet in the header (as the cookbook does); long entries made it challenging to find one’s place while navigating through the encyclopedia.

Taking up the twin conceptions of food as mirror and window from the encyclopedia, the cookbook *Ethnic American Cooking: Recipes for Living in a New World* gives a brief introduction to foodways and ethnicity. The cookbook is organized alphabetically by ethnic group, introducing each group and providing information on nomenclature and geographic region. For example, the entry for Monaco reads “Monaco (Western Europe), Monegasque American,” and the introduction explains the relationship between foodways in Monaco, and those in nearby France and Italy (Long 2016:194).

The introduction to the cookbook indicates that when traditional ingredients are difficult to find in the United States, substitutions are offered. While this would present its own set of challenges, I wish that more of the recipes offered suggestions for brands. For example, the recipe for sadza, the staple food of Zimbabwe and common in South Africa and Botswana, calls for “white cornmeal.” Since I have many students from Zimbabwe, I would like to cook this dish for



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college potlucks but I don't know what kind of white corn meal to buy. When I asked my Zimbabwean students they told me Quaker white corn meal was the closest brand they had found in the U.S. but that people who are very serious about their sadza buy imported mealie meal or have it sent by family and friends back home. Some recipes, like La Reina Pepiada (Venezuelan arepas) and Curry Chicken (Trinidad and Tobago) do include brand recommendations.

I cooked Makloubia (upside down Palestinian rice, 226), Pho (Vietnamese beef noodle soup, 301), Fry Bread ("Native American," 208), and Ghanaian Tea Bread (110). I was very happy with the rice and the soup, found the Fry Bread recipe to be dryer and less salty than the fry bread I have eaten in Wisconsin and Manitoba (perhaps because this recipe is in the Southwestern Native American section or perhaps because my technique is undeveloped), and the Tea Bread to be pleasant, though I substituted brown sugar for caster sugar and put butter on the slices when I served it. I had intended to make Pirogo (Gypsy or Roma American noodle pudding, 122) but it called for "5 cubes of butter" and since I was not sure what that meant, I have not yet experimented with that recipe. Similarly, I planned to make Peanut Butter Soup with Chicken (103), but dawdled because I was not sure whether the recipe ought to be made with skin-on, bone-in thighs or boneless skinless thighs (a distinction which probably says more about me as a perfectionist American cook and may not actually matter to the success of the recipe).

Aside from the question of identifying the ideal ingredient or iron-clad quantities, the recipes are generally quite clear. In fact, the varied voices, ingredient flexibility, and very occasional uncertainty make the cookbook (and the encyclopedia) feel human and alive—like a tour through someone else's recipe box. Many of these recipes come from home cooks, and the intimacy and informality of sharing family recipes separates these hybrid books—scholarly and practical, theoretical and hands-on—from the burgeoning commercial cookbook industry. The books emphasize the connection of the head to the heart, and the minority to the majority, and throughout both texts Long never over-simplifies ethnicity and economic and social power struggles.