Review of:  
**Congotay! Congotay! A Global History of Caribbean Food**

By Candice Goucher.  

By: Rachel Finn *(Archivist/Librarian & Independent Researcher, New York)*

Food is always a fascinating and tangible way of tracing history or social movements, examining culture, and understanding people. A particular dish, recipe, or ingredient can often shed light on the historical events, the movements, or even the people who have created or are tied to them. Candice Goucher’s *Congotay! Congotay! A Global History of Caribbean Food* proves all of this. This slim, engaging volume tells the sweeping story of Caribbean food (and colonialism, and enslavement) and serves as an excellent example of how to write a richly complex food history.

In the introduction, Goucher writes that the book will “map[s] the contours of Caribbean history and, by association, the cultural and social dimension of the planet’s largest narrative of globalization” (xviii). The largest narrative of globalization to which she is referring is, of course, the colonization of the Americas and the Caribbean which spurred the Transatlantic Slave Trade and, after official and reluctant criminalization of chattel slavery by European colonizers, the coerced migration of millions of South and East Asians to these lands after the legalized end to slavery. The social and cultural dimensions refer to the transfer of recipes, ingredients, food processing and agricultural knowledge, as well as the role of all of these things in the lives of African, Asian, and European immigrants (and to a limited degree Native Americans) in their adopted lands.

The book itself is organized into six chapters that are in turn broken into multiple sections that sketch out for the reader a very clear and thorough picture of Caribbean foodways and the multicultural elements and common history that comprise it. The author takes care to highlight the diversity of nations that make up the geographical region and also
the ethnic diversity of the people themselves. She points out that Africans and Asians represented many different ethnic groups but created a new culture melding elements from many different cultures (including Native American and European ones) to form new Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean identities that were distinct from the ones they had left behind. Elements of all of these groups are reflected in food and cooking techniques.

Starting with the voyages to and from Africa and Europe, Goucher starts with an exploration of the development of maritime cookery citing it as one of the foundational elements of Caribbean Foodways and itself a product of the intermingling of tastes, ingredients, and cultures that globalization stimulates. She mentions techniques such as long stewing (itself an element of classic continental African cooking), which allowed maritime cooks to easily feed large numbers of people on long transatlantic voyages, and ingredients such as salted fish and meats that were preserved for as provisions and played an important roles in the predominance of salted fish and meat in Caribbean cooking. Pungent spicing, and African foodstuffs, such as chilies and yams were included to appease human cargo but also made food on the transatlantic voyage more palatable and more nutritionally sound. More importantly, Goucher points out that they defined maritime cooking and made their way -as new and recycled components-- into the culinary repertoire of the African cooks who would control kitchens throughout the Caribbean for centuries. From the 1600s onward, those Africans would further develop their own cooking practices and by the time Indian and Chinese indentured workers began arriving in the middle to late 1800s, a strongly African-influenced cuisine, with less pronounced traces of European and maritime food culture, defined eating and cooking throughout the Caribbean

After exploring maritime cookery, Goucher dedicates subsequent chapters to African food and cooking and adaption to the new Caribbean environment. She explores the important and brutal role of sugar in the development of Caribbean food culture when she covers the arrival of South and East Asian indentured workers and their contributions to the culinary mix of the region. In a section called “Feeding the Spirits” the author covers African food practices and belief systems related to them and Asian-Caribbean religious food uses in Indian and Chinese cultures. Here it becomes clear that food plays an important role in nourishing body and spirit. From there Goucher explores food in the context of Caribbean family, sexuality, and social interactions.

Throughout the book, the author uses culinary and cultural terms specific to countries that are considered part of the Caribbean. She deftly weaves together a narrative that places plantation cooking, the various roles of food in Obeah, Vodun, Santería, Rastafari
and other creolized religious cultures, carnival celebrations, and family and everyday life in appropriate context of countries within the French, English, Spanish, and Dutch-speaking Caribbean. The study is comprehensive and provides expansive evidence of the commonalities that link these the food cultures—and by extension the general history—of these countries and the diverse elements that set them apart. The inclusion of a limited number of regional recipes for dishes mentioned in a particular section or chapter makes the book interactive for those who may be so inclined. The commentary accompanying the recipes helps to reinforce the idea that most are common throughout the Caribbean but reflect variations specific to a particular country or cultural group within the region.

This is a comprehensive study that delves deeper than many other works into the subject by placing the human faces of colonialism, enslavement, and indentured servitude at the center of the story, and specifically the black and brown ones whose food cultures unwittingly transformed the global culinary landscape. It provides a complement to two recent collections of essays, *Food and Identity in the Caribbean* edited by Hannah Garth (2013) and *Caribbean Food Cultures: Culinary Practices and Consumption in the Caribbean and its Diasporas* edited by Wiebke Beushausen et al. (2014), that offer reflections on particular aspects of Caribbean food culture, as well as Richard Wilk’s book *Home Cooking in the Global Village: Caribbean Food from Buccaneers to Ecotourists* (2006). Wilk provides a history of Caribbean food but his focus is on Belize and he offers less of an intimate portrait of African and Asian people and their respective places in shaping Caribbean food throughout the region.

In *Congotay! Congotay!* the subject matter is treated respectfully and honestly. It is an anthropological history that manages to avoid an overtly anthropological gaze. The book weaves socio-historical complexities of race, ethnicity, and class while managing to maintain its focus on the Caribbean and frankly the dominant African and Asian cultural and culinary influences. It is a welcome addition to foodways studies literature on Caribbean food, globalization, and colonialism and will be accessible and engaging for everyone from students to advanced researchers.