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About AFSAAP

Anyone who has experienced African life will be well aware of the vast range of dishes, ingredients, and flavours that one encounters from region to region throughout the continent. Such a variety of cuisines reflects the cultural diversity of Africa and is also a marker of local cultural identity. While many publications have presented African cuisine in the form of recipes and cookery books, few have delved deeper than the basics of meal preparation. It is refreshing that some authors have explored further, and pose, for example, the question - “What can we learn about African history from its cookery?” This matter is the central focus of “Stirring the pot. A history of African cuisine”, a text by the history professor James C. McCann.

Within the disciplines of Cultural Studies and History research on food traditions is a relatively new though expanding area of enquiry. McCann adds to it by examining Africa’s culinary arts as an “historical phenomenon,” influenced by empires and the cultural exchanges that mark major historical events. In the opening chapter he illustrates his assertion by providing descriptions of the basic ingredients available to cooks in Africa over the past few thousand years. He examines the distribution of the ingredients, their origins, and their incorporation in local dishes. In later chapters the influences of new food types on culinary practices is discussed, and thus a basic chronology of the history of African cuisines is presented, with a final chapter on “Diaspora cookery.”

McCann informs us that one of the principal reasons for the great diversity found in African cuisines lies in the distribution of raw materials. Here, he draws our attention to the introduction and exportation of various food types. His description of the introduction of New World crops (tomatoes, corn, pineapples, etc) is enhanced by his list of African foods that were exported (okra, coffee, millet, etc), and a chapter is devoted to the topic of “Africa, circulation, and the New World Pot.” Here the author introduces the term “the Atlantic circulation,” which is the cultural exchange between Africa and the New World, and underscores its importance in the development of African culinary cultures. This huge flow of ideas, recipes, and ingredients had a major impact on African (and New World) cuisines, and here McCann emphasises his point that cultural exchange lies at the heart of modern African cuisine. His argument thus rejects the static notions of “traditional” food, but rather impresses upon the reader that what makes a
cuisine unique is a multiplicity of factors that help shape society itself.

McCann saves a large section of his book for the topic of Ethiopian cuisine, which covers some 500 years of their culinary practices. Here he discusses the links between food and national identity, and focuses on the efforts of Queen Taytu Bitul in the late 19th century. He provides a fascinating account of her national feasts, which lasted many days, and which heralded both a new political order and a new concept of nationhood through the repertoire of dishes presented. The author also situates the cuisines of West Africa, such as the Akan, Asante, and Manding, within a broad historical framework which covers the colonial period to the modern era.

It is unfortunate that in the media Africa is often associated with famine and poor nutrition. Little evidence is provided to show the rich diversity of regional cuisines on offer, and the important role that cooking has in Africa’s history. This text by McCann will hopefully go some way to correct that notion, while also illustrating the important relationship between food, identity, and history. An extensive list of local terms for staple ingredients is also included in the text, as are numerous recipes, some of which are centuries old. The author also writes extensively on the origin and usage of staple cooking ingredients such as rice, yams, sorghum, millet, cassava, plaintains, maize, and chillies, and discusses cooking techniques that have evolved over time. The text is thus suitable for students and chefs alike.

Graeme Counsel
University of Melbourne
Author/s: Counsel, G

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