



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

Review of:

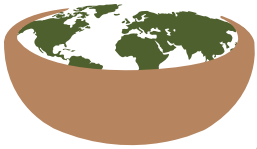
The Carrot Purple and Other Curious Stories of the Food We Eat.

Denker, Joel S. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015. 315 pages, including Bibliography and Index.

Review By: Kim D. Stryker

Joel S. Denker is a food writer and historian based in the Washington, D.C. area, who has published two other books on food as well as reported for the Boston Globe and The Washington Post. In this book, *The Carrot Purple*, he has compiled interesting anecdotes about the origins and varied uses of some of the foods we commonly eat. Organized alphabetically, from anise to watermelon, Denker has selected “curious stories” of herbs, fruits, vegetables and nuts. Using a wide range of historical sources, Denker uncovers how these crops found their way from ancient Caucasian forests and Persian orchards and onto our modern grocery shelves. In the author’s words, the “journey of foods from obscurity to familiarity” (Denker 2015:3).

For example, the carrot of the book’s title, which we consider to be the very exemplar of orangeness, Denker explains was originally more valued for its greens than its puny root, and was purple, before cultivation yielded the sweet and sunset-hued vegetable we know today (60). While I was not surprised by purple carrots, I’ve seen them often enough at farmer’s markets, I did enjoy learning about the different attitudes towards certain foods and how they changed over time. Evidently, the cucumber was perceived as a nefarious food upon introduction from the Far East to the British Isles. The vegetable’s cool, moist nature was interpreted as a harbinger of sickness and death (123). Denker quotes a 16th-century English expression: “Raw cucumber makes the churchyards prosperous” which tells of the suspicion this plant was held in. Yet, in the hot dry climates of India, Egypt and Greece, the cucumber was highly prized both for parching thirst and for its fecund properties (122).



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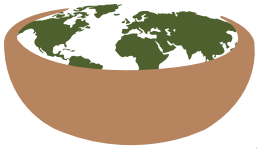
Denker interprets the growing habits, shapes, and colors of certain foods through the lens of the cultures they were found in and imbued with significance.

Each story reveals some of the associated cultural values connected to foods, whether they were despised or prized, taboo or medicinal. Denker chose not to write a continuous narrative, rather each food has its own entry, making it more likely that readers will enjoy it a few food stories at a time, rather than reading it cover to cover. In this way, *The Carrot Purple* is reminiscent of the old folklore miscellanies, such as *Myths and Legends of Flowers, Trees, Fruits, and Plants: In All Ages and Climes* compiled by Charles M. Skinner in 1911.

As a collection of anecdotes, *The Carrot Purple* may have been improved by the addition of full color illustrations or even maps to chart the progress of foods across continents. The first line of Denker's chapter on chocolate asks: "Have you ever seen the tropical cacao tree that is native to the rain forests of Central and South America? Even a photo of it? The image is arresting" (90). But where is the arresting image? Instead the book gives us a black-and-white photo of some gloomy cacao pods.

There is a rather unequal treatment of some foods in this collection. Poor arugula is covered in scantily more than two pages, whilst the lowly chickpea gets a full court press at seven pages. There doesn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to why certain foods are more fully covered or even left out altogether, other than the author's choice, which can be a bit frustrating to the reader. One can understand leaving out the story behind the peach, when the author has covered its close cousin, the apricot perhaps, but to exclude the apple completely seems an odd oversight. Capers are explored, but not coconuts; lentils are expounded upon, but not lettuce. The lack of consistency in Denker's approach irritated my sense of order, but casual readers may not be bothered.

Additionally, more could have been done to weave these stories together, perhaps situating these food histories in the context of today's debates about the future of food, GMOs, and the rapid expansion of global cultural exchange. In his discussion of cinnamon and the role the spice trade played in the expansion of European colonization of Southeast Asia (98-100), Denker begins to expand the narrative, but then seems to lose steam. Perhaps because the author's strength is in historical research, or he takes it for granted as common knowledge, which explains why he fails to fully investigate the modern methods of cultivation in a contemporary context. There is one such missed opportunity is his conclusion to the story of



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chocolate. After a fascinating discussion of the discovery of cacao in the New World by European explorers and the spread of colonization, Denker fails to even mention the American chocolate giants Hershey and Mars, or to examine the unequal benefits of chocolate profiteering and the adverse effects Western demand has in terms of environmental and labor consequences. But then, *The Carrot Purple* is merely trying to interest and amuse readers, so perhaps I am expecting too much from this author.

The Carrot Purple is most engaging when Denker weaves his own experiences into the story. His writing can be evocative and pull us along into uncovering the mysteries behind a food, as he does with the entry on cloves. Denker's opening sentences to the chapter pull the reader along into exotic Zanzibar: "The steamy tropical air of the Indian Ocean was thick with spicy fumes. Aromatic droplets fragrant with cloves filled the atmosphere. A recent college graduate teaching in Dar es Salaam [...], I walked through the harbor during a brief sojourn on the island off the east coast of Tanzania" (101). His best writing carries the reader into the adventure of discovering the stories behind food.

Denker stays true to his mission, as stated in the introduction, to synthesize the findings of wide range of expert food scholars and boil it all down for better consumption by a popular audience (2). From Pliny the Elder's documentation of the use of anise among the ancient Romans, to Shakespeare's frequent mention of onions, and from 17th-century botanist Nicholas Culpeper's expertise on medicinal plant usage to 20th-century Harold McGee's scientific analysis of cooking processes, *The Carrot Purple* gives readers a well-researched introduction to the hidden stories behind common foods.

References Cited

Skinner, Charles M. 1911. *Myths and Legends of Flowers, Trees, Fruits, and Plants: In All Ages and Climes*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott.