



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

Review of:

Food on the Rails: The Golden Age of Railway Dining (Jeri Quinzio).

Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014. Pp.

153, notes, index.

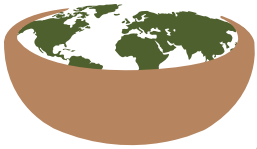
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Review By: Nicholas Eaton
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In her latest work, *Food on the Rails, The Golden Era of Railroad Dining*, Jeri Quinzio draws in both railroad buffs and those with an interest in culinary history. From the crumbly dry sandwiches people ate on trains with tobacco spit soaked floors of the 1820s, to the grand cuisine served on “la belle epoch’s” Orient Express and the pattering post war “automat” microwaved dishes, to the death of railway food with the invention of commercial flight and Amtrak, this is a railroad story that inspires both disgust and delight. *Food on the Rails*, a magnificent work that tells the tale of food served at high speeds, will keep both train hobbyists and food scholars riveted.

While a great deal of the book focuses on the stories of the wealthy, there is space left for the stories of the men and women who served them, the everyday passenger, and the entrepreneurs, American and European, who brought food served on trains to equal anything served in the best restaurants in the world at the time (for some while at least).

Food on the Rails is as much a story of great men doing great things, as it is one of men who would go on to do great things. Quinzio relates the tales of both Walt Disney and Thomas Edison who, like many other working class boys at the time, sold candies, oranges, and newspapers on the trains. The term for these young chaps was “News Butcher.” These two met with some trouble, Edison finally being prohibited



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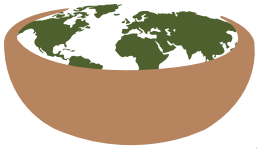
from working on the trains because of his so called “experiments” in the back areas by a conductor who was none too pleased with him. Disney went on to become a lifelong train buff, despite being a poor candy salesman, and integrated this love of trains into his later work of Disney Land, as any who have visited the parks can attest. Edison, well, we all know the path which tinkering around on trains took him down.

The tale of folks trying to settle the West of the United States and their inability to find a decent meal along the rail is told in vivid detail by Quinzio. As late as the 1870s trains to the American West afforded very few opportunities for sustenance, and it is related that buffalo meat was piled outside the stations for passengers in between stops to cut hunks of meat off that could be cooked to order. Often times these steaks were served with old beans and coffee, which were really only partaken of to fight off hunger. Usually the trains would leave before any real meal could be had.

Across the pond, the British at least offered so called “tearooms” at railway stops which sold typical snacks like tea and sandwiches, pork pies, cakes and sausage rolls, but again, these were often old and displeased many of the passengers looking for a quick ten minute bite between stops. Charles Dickens even remarked on the poor quality of these items, calling the pork pies “glutinous lumps of gristle and grease.” But things would not always be this way.

By the 1840s European and Canadian Rail lines built their own hotels to accommodate passengers and provide wonderful food. The Americans lagged behind in this regard, however, still offering food which the New York Times referred to as “Abominations of Desolation,” in an article dated June 10, 1857. The American solution was to offer lunch baskets to passengers that could be ordered by wiring ahead to the next station. These included items like oysters, ham, boiled eggs, bread, olives, sardines, and pickled pig’s feet.

An interest for anyone reading the book lies in the industry of two men named George. One, an American with the last name Pullman, was so inventive and creative and his standards so high, that his name represented the very definition of quality and luxury in both the United States and in England in his time. The other was a Belgian with the last name of Nagelmackers. He was Pullman’s European counterpart, and ran several luxurious trains, but none so famous or iconic as the illustrious Orient Express, a ticket on which from Paris to Constantinople, cost more than the annual salary of one of the highly skilled wait staff who worked on it. The



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sections on the Orient Express and the Pullman cars are worth the read alone.

Food on the Rails is a great read, but if I were to voice one complaint about the book, it is that it is so brief. It is an extremely interesting work, and I would have enjoyed learning more about an age that so few of us living today have had the ability to experience. Even when dining cars were common, they were a luxury, like first class flying. This brevity continues into the biographical outlines of the characters who shaped the work, but are complex and interesting enough to encourage further reading. One area of the book where Quinzio is more than generous is the recipes from various eras and countries, describing culinary terms and methods used, which I appreciated as a Culinary Educator. One needn't possess professional cooking knowledge though, as the solid and brief culinary explanations serve the uninitiated as well.

Food on the Rails is a quick read, packed with information and stories which will expand the train buff's interest to include the culinary history of the rail, and will introduce the culinary historian or foodways scholar to an area which might have been previously overlooked in their research. Even for someone interested in neither food nor trains, it is magnificent entry into the world of the mid-19th to mid-20th century, as every major event happening on the world stage is mentioned and viewed through the lens of the railways passenger, both patrician and plebian.