

Before “Farm to Table” Early Modern Foodways & Cultures Project at the Folger Library

By: Julia Fine

The Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC, home to the world’s largest collection of early modern English manuscript recipe books, launched its multidisciplinary, \$1.5 million Mellon-funded *Before ‘Farm to Table’: Early Modern Foodways and Cultures* project in 2017.¹ Drawing on the work of historians, anthropologists, geographers, literary critics, artists, and more, this five-year project investigates how food shapes—and was in turn shaped by—culture, migration, violence, trade, and geopolitics. It focuses on the period from 1450 to 1800, a moment in history when European acts of colonization and conquest gave rise to a new kind of global foodways.

Since its inception, *Before ‘Farm to Table’* has embraced a collaborative working model, with a multidisciplinary team of scholars designing a wide range of programs in order to probe the function of food in the early modern world. These projects have taken many forms: workshops; lectures; an interactive performance art piece in the Folger’s historic Reading Room; an exhibit in the Folger’s Great Hall, highlighting the unsung heroes who shaped the food culture of Britain and America; collaborations with humanitarian chef José Andrés; and a traveling exhibition that will take place in Washington DC in the fall of 2020. This exciting program, focusing upon the contributions of people who were marginalized in the early modern period, will see Folger materials installed at local restaurants, cultural centers, and advocacy organizations like Busboys and Poets, a restaurant group which advocates for social justice and community activism.

Recently, the *Before ‘Farm to Table’* team hosted a graduate student workshop on “Eating Through The Archives,” which invited over 20 students from institutions around the world to come to the Folger and discuss the challenges and gratifications of multidisciplinary approaches to food. What can we learn when practitioners of Spanish Literature, the History of Science, and Postcolonial Studies compare notes on food? What are the best approaches to researching and understanding food in the past and the present? What do “foodways” mean, and how do they move, react, and change?

Questions like these structured the workshop and fueled its discussions. In one breakout session, led by Jack Bouchard, students explored how to study travelogues, maps, artwork, and ephemera to find depictions of non-elite, marginalized people and reveal their experiences and relationships with food. Another session, led by Heather Wolfe and Elisa Tersigni, taught participants how to read not only the words inscribed in cookbooks written hundreds of years ago, but also their materiality: close study of bindings, folds, paper, and stitching can deepen our understanding of a book’s historical

and literary framework. One particularly memorable session featured a roundtable by health equity advocates Ambrose Lane, Jr. and Laura MacCleery and culinary historian Michael W. Twitty. The panelists unpacked the long and fraught history of sugar in the Americas, and urged the students to think of a “history of a particular commodity and its history on bodies as a social justice story,” that pervades the present day.

Through programs like “Eating Through The Archives,” *Before ‘Farm to Table’* works to stress the need for multidisciplinary in food studies, the importance of re-examining and contextualizing the notion of foodways, and how critical it is to apply global frameworks to the study of food cultures. The team continues with these efforts, as well as others, as they undertake future projects: writing articles on the hidden colonial history of English condiments; convening a conference on “Food and the Book,” featuring chef and food-writer Tamar Adler; and creating an open-access, searchable corpus of the Folger’s early modern English handwritten recipes, which anyone in the world may view.

Before ‘Farm to Table’ is led by David Goldstein, Amanda Herbert, and Heather Wolfe, and includes three Postdoctoral Fellows, Jack Bouchard, Elisa Tersigni, and Michael Walkden. Jonathan MacDonald acts as the Project Coordinator, and Julia Fine is the Dumbarton Oaks Humanities Fellow attached to the project.

¹ See <https://www.folger.edu/history> and <https://www.folger.edu/before-farm-to-table-early-modern-foodways-cultures> (access April 22, 2020).