

Review of:

Road Sides: An Illustrated Companion to Dining and Driving in the American South

Emily Wallace. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2019. Pp. 175, sources, index of places, 100 color illustrations.

Review by: Charley Camp

Foodways scholars, I would wager, are more conscious than most when it comes to categories and criteria for membership. That may explain why there have been so few food-based guidebooks since the 1930s based upon or attentive to eating. Exceptions must include mile-by-mile guides for U.S. Routes 30 and 40, coast to coast, and a handful of local guidebooks devoted to a place, or better yet—a road. Alas, in these pandemic times, eateries close to reopen as laundromats; grand restaurants as carry-outs.

Emily Wallace makes modest claims for *Road Sides*. For starters, most of what she writes and draws is roadside or drive-in food, a category food writers generally ignore. Yes, there are exceptions, including the Gaffney Peach-roadside, yes—visible for about fifty miles—but discernibly inedible. After all, what is an “illustrated companion” that makes no claim to relative completeness? Or a volume devoted to “dining and driving” with neither a map nor driving directions to eateries visited and recommended?

Two technical problems make matters worse: alphabetical listing, by topic (not eatery), and disrespect for the Mason-Dixon line. Yes, I know that no one, I mean no one, locates Baltimore in the American South. Is it simply my location and age that make this a prickly point? The distribution of eateries by state, by topic, and alphabetically (whew) seems otherwise fair, although Jane and Michael Stern had more to say about several of the same places in their much-missed *Roadfood* books.

That’s where the heartache really begins. There’s no evidence that the author of *Road Sides* visited each and every eatery included in the companion, and not just because some of the places given mention aren’t eateries—such as the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, where Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated (131), or the Cracker Barrel chain, nearby wherever you are.

I will confess to admiration for the 100 color illustrations in the book (number 100 is a nice drawing of the author), even though some of them have little to do with foods or food signs, but I can’t help wondering if author/illustrator Wallace might have better spent her time in the presence of the actual food purveyors included in the *Companion*. That’s because too many of the book’s brief descriptions of eateries are based upon Chamber-of-Commerce text instead of

taste buds.

Finally, I cite a now-ancient authority for this criticism—the Society for the North American Cultural Survey (SNACS), which published a photocopied atlas in 1980 that included foodways. SNACS received a significant number of criticisms for their prototype from folklorists and anthropologists who insisted that every entry for an ethnic restaurant must be backed up by a meal. The length of time to perform this task set the project back about two years, but the final foodways survey was based not just on the names of restaurants, but what their food tasted like.

Why do I bring up this ancient anecdote? To make a difficult but necessary distinction. I think *Road Sides* is an interesting and unique book that summons the recollection of food and travel—Southern food in particular. I doubt that I will consult it before I next travel south, but I do like the pictures.