

Review of:

Eating Right in America: The Cultural Politics of Food and Health

Charlotte Biltekoff. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013. 208 pp.

Review By: Emily J.H. Contois

Brown University

While food studies scholars all too often quote Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's proclamation, "Tell me what you eat and I will tell you who you are," the judgmental tone of his now famous aphorism communicates the fear that resonates within many an American eater. Big Mac or organic kale, fast or slow, fat or thin, unhealthy or healthy, what one eats and the shape and size one's body takes powerfully communicate (or perhaps betray) who one is, at least according to reigning social ideals. When we talk about "eating right," we are never discussing only nutrients, calories, or vitamins; healthy weight statuses, disease risks, or longevity. We can only ever be talking about the selves that we desire to be and to become—selves available only to those with the resources necessary to attain them.

Charlotte Biltekoff, once a chef at Greens in San Francisco and now Assistant Professor of American Studies and Food Science and Technology at the University of California, Davis, addresses these issues in her new book, *Eating Right in America: The Cultural Politics of Food and Health*. In this history of American dietary reform, Biltekoff argues that dietary choices are a near constant source of anxiety due to the "ongoing expansions in the social significance of dietary health and the moral valence of being a 'good eater'" (5). Progressing chronologically, Biltekoff chronicles in successive chapters the ideals espoused by four dietary reform movements—the Progressive Era domestic science movement, the nutrition education components of the World War II home front food program, the mainstream alternative food movement, and the anti-obesity campaigns that continue to reign.

As a rich canon of books dedicated to American food culture has been developed over the past thirty years, others have written on the four dietary reform movements that constitute the narrative arc of Biltekoff's text. For example, Laura Shapiro in *Perfection Salad* (1986) and Harvey Levenstein in *Revolution at the Table* (1988) each historicize turn-of-the-century domestic scientists, who sought to align American eating habits with pragmatic scientific principles. Texts such as Amy Bentley's *Eating for Victory* (1998) demonstrate how World War II shaped American foodways. Warren Belasco's *Appetite for Change* (1989) tells the story of the 1960s countercuisine so completely that no other book project has needed to attempt it. And Julie Guthman's *Weighing In* (2011) is one of the most recent and well-received works exploring obesity within the context of neoliberalism.

What makes Biltekoff's text important, however, is how she places these four dietary reform movements in conversation with one another, identifying moments of overlap, continuity, convergence, and symbiotic growth. She reveals how even though the dietary advice imparted and the social, cultural, and political context that fuels it may change, the underlying message remains constant. For Biltekoff, dietary reform is always about fashioning good citizens, a focus garnered from reformers' published and unpublished writings and the materials through which they communicated their nutrition advice to both acquiescent and resistant audiences. From this evidence, Biltekoff demonstrates how the purview of dietary reform movements extends beyond calories, vitamins, organics, and the body mass index, as they endeavor to mold good citizens through good eating.

In this way, *Eating Right in America* is a text with a mission. No matter how desperately they seek dietary prescriptions, this book does not seek to instruct Americans on how to eat right. Rather it encourages readers to embrace the process of "rethinking...exactly what it is we think we know about dietary health" (5), an endeavor that is as disorienting as it is illuminating. In this exercise, the empirical certainty of nutrition science is exchanged for the less stable but more dynamic understanding of dietary advice as a social and cultural construction. In this way, dietary advice—whether based on caloric efficiency, essential vitamins, knowing where your food comes from, or achieving a "healthy weight"—embodies social ideals.

Within this line of analysis, Biltekoff respectfully critiques the now well-known writings of Gyorgy Scrinis and Michael Pollan, arguing that nutritionism tells only part of a more complex story, as it does not address how eaters conceptualize good selves and understand other people—the additional social work that dietary recommendations accomplish. Drawing from Robert Crawford (at times rather heavily) and John Coveney, Biltekoff also undertakes a larger theoretical project to "illuminate...the cultural politics of health, the historical dynamics of class, and the process of social normalization," as well as to "provoke a dialogue about what health really means to us and what its pursuit should look like" (4). With social class a central feature of her narrative, she also hopes to "cause readers to think about dietary health as a privilege" (4).

In its interdisciplinary approach, scope, perspective, and aims, this text draws multiple fields into energetic discussion. A history positioned at the intersection of food studies and fat studies, the text also pushes both fields further, urging food studies scholars to consider questions of health, as well as the biomedical focus of good eating in America. She also suggests that studying fat in concert with food, health, and identity can illuminate the broader context surrounding the vilification of fat bodies in America. The text also engages critical nutrition studies and science and technology studies as it interrogates scientific knowledge production in historical perspective. This historical exercise reveals that dietary advice so strongly influences American eaters in part because it is the progeny of science—which throughout the course of the twentieth century came to be considered an irrefutable cultural arbiter of truth—and social ideals, which embody American hopes, desires, and ways of being.

Of course, one cannot help but notice the absence of attention in the text to the 1950s and 1960s, a time marked by a reform effort led by the food industry itself, which sought new domestic markets for

wartime foodstuffs, from Spam to powdered orange juice. Eventually winning the hearts and stomachs of a generation of American housewives with “packaged-food cuisine” (Shapiro: 56), the convenience products of the food industry—not to mention the rise of car culture, fast food, and suburban supermarkets—altered American eating to the extent that it fueled the reactionary efforts of the alternative food movement, where Biltekoff picks up her somewhat fractured narrative.

To conclude, however, this well-researched, effectively organized, and accessibly written book deserves a broad audience and will be of particular interest to scholars of food studies, fat studies, reform movements, and twentieth century American social and cultural history. For in the end, *Eating Right in America* achieves its mission to encourage readers to reconsider what we think we know about nutrition science, dietary advice, and health, as well as how they operate within American culture. This is a book to press eagerly into the hands of any nutrition student or dietetics professional, so that they may first consider and then transform the social messages that are included in the dietary advice that they impart. Biltekoff also challenges us all, as consumers of dietary knowledge, to engage the skills of “dietary literacy” (155) to think critically about how dietary advice and cultural values are always intertwined, with every bite that we take.

References Cited

Shapiro, Laura. 2004. *Something from the Oven. Reinventing Dinner in 1950s. America.* New York: Viking.