

Book Review

Review of:

The Truth about Baked Beans: An Edible History of New England Meg Muckenhaupt, New York: New York University Press, 2020. Pp. 345, introduction, conclusion, acknowledgments, notes, index, about the author.

Review By: Ruzhica Samokovlija Baruh

Meg Muckenhaupt's latest, *The Truth about Baked Beans: An Edible History of New England*, takes the readers on a historical and culinary journey that challenges the longstanding myths and realities surrounding some of New England's most iconic foods—baked beans, brown bread, clams, cod and lobsters, cornbread, Vermont cheese, apples, cranberries, maple syrup, pies, and Yankee pot roast. The truth behind their origin, as Muckenhaupt suggests, lies at the crossroads of skillfully crafted Victorian ideals, the exclusion of immigrant culinary traditions, and the profound transformations brought about by the region's evolving geography and economy (4). Through meticulous research and insightful storytelling, Muckenhaupt dismantles the myths to unveil a more accurate, and inclusive narrative of New England's food.

Before delving into the histories and traditions of New England's food, Muckenhaupt takes a moment to set the record straight regarding "who was(is) who" in this diverse region. In contrast to the oversimplified portrayal of New England as solely the domain of "Stoic Pilgrims, passionate Minutemen, and thrifty Yankee farmers," she astutely reminds us that the region's history is far more complex (5). From the initial encounters between the Eastern Woodlands People and the Yankees, to the invaluable knowledge of Irish women and African American cooks, and ethnic dishes like Fall River pierogi, Portuguese *caldo verde*, and Puerto Rican rice and beans, Muckenhaupt paints a picture of New England as a dynamic melting pot. Yet, amidst this remarkable diversity, she rightly points out that many of these contributions remained underrepresented in local cookbooks (45-46). Some iconic dishes, such as Boston baked beans, have faced even greater injustices, with their origins mistakenly attributed to unspecified Native American nations. In chapter two, she asserts the following "Even though there is ample evidence that the dish was concocted after the Civil War, the potential influence of immigrants (in this case French Canadians) and industrial food processing (canneries) has been consistently downplayed or altogether ignored" (48).

In chapter three, Muckenhaupt directs us from misconceptions to limitations, shedding light on the five constraints that hindered the development of New England cuisine in the late 18th century: Urbanization and industrialization, the influence of the "New England Kitchen" exhibits, social reformers focused on providing cheap food for the poor, the Colonial Revival, and the relationship between New England elites and their cooks [64]. While on the surface, these limitations may seem straightforward, the underlying motivations were fueled by far more damaging factors, such as anti-immigration sentiments, racism, gender inequality, and employment disparities. One could argue that the most detrimental was the influence of The Colonial Revival movement. As Muckenhaupt points out, this movement, while idealizing a nostalgic vision of early New England cuisine, obscured its most destructive facet through a deliberate exclusion of non-white ethnic foods from its narrative "A small subset of New

England foods – baked beans, pies, brown bread, boiled dinner – were charged with Yankee virtue.” [78] This cultural whitewashing primarily came at the expense of Irish immigrant women who often assumed roles as cooks and maids. As Muckenhoupt illustrates, the media perpetuated harmful stereotypes about these women, ridiculing their culinary skills and competence and depicting them as awful Irish maids, “who couldn’t soft-boil an egg, served ‘undressed tomatoes’ in their underwear, and burnt and ruined anything they touched” [80].

Issues of harmful prejudices and exclusions are pervasive in chapter four as well, where Muckenhoupt examines the historical decline of corn-based foods in New England. One of the key aspects highlighted is the early colonists’ preference for wheat over corn. This preference was rooted in wheat’s association with the upper class in England, showcasing how cultural biases influenced food choices even in the New World. Moreover, corn carried a stigma among the colonists, being seen as a grain tainted by primitiveness and uncertainty “Corn was also a strange new plant eaten by Indians, the unfamiliar people the colonists were displacing, killing, and infecting with smallpox” (100). By the 1840s, corn faced yet another stigma in New England, this time associated with slavery “Cornmeal was generally the only grain given to southern slaves” (109). The combination of these cultural discriminations, along with climate change, and agricultural practices, posed serious challenges to the survival of corn-based foods in the region. However, the story of New England’s corn takes an interesting turn. Towards the late 19th and early 20th century, influenced by immigrant communities, corn-based dishes began to make a comeback (114). As Muckenhoupt observes, cornmeal could once again regain popularity in New England, thanks to the influence of Latino immigrant communities “If ‘New England’ cookbooks and food writers become more open to the foods actually eaten by today’s New England residents, perhaps cornmeal will become a northern food once again” (120). This circular story of New England’s corn prompts us to contemplate not just what has occurred but rather the possibilities of how and to what extent the region’s cuisine might have transformed, had corn been wholeheartedly embraced from the beginning.

A more accurate depiction of New England’s history unfolds during the intermission, titled “Recipes.” Within this interlude, Muckenhoupt’s mission not only becomes evident but also takes on a deeply noble dimension: to present an all-encompassing and accurate portrait of New England’s edible history through a collection of recipes. This involves acknowledging both the well-known and less-celebrated individuals, groups, and communities that have played pivotal roles in shaping the region’s culinary heritage.

In chapter five, Muckenhoupt takes us from land to sea, illustrating how New England’s iconic seafood, such as cod, chowder, and lobster, though deeply ingrained into the region’s identity, sees limited consumption among locals today (165). Muckenhoupt attributes this shift not solely to changes in fishing practices, habitat management, and global market dynamics, but also to the fervent idealization of the archetypal “Stalwart, grizzled, salty New England fisherman!” (208). The romanticized and heroic portrayal of fishermen in New England culture (209), coupled with the influence of family-owned fishing enterprises (212-213), significantly obstructed the implementation of sustainable fishing regulations, consequently giving rise to processed seafood alternatives like fish sticks. In this dire climate, one notable exception, as observed by Muckenhoupt, is the lobster industry in Maine “Lobsters are thriving, but the cod catch

has collapsed to 5 percent of early twentieth-century levels. Whether New Englanders will enjoy these iconic seafoods 50 years from now may depend more on today's fishermen than on tomorrow's eaters" (199).

Today, many consumers rarely ponder over the origin behind their favorite dishes. Yet, Muckenhoupt's sixth chapter reminds us that the story about the rediscovery and transformation of New England's Maple syrup, cranberries, and apples, is indeed worth telling. Some of these transformations are unavoidable, driven by market forces (226) and harsh climate conditions (244). However, others, such as the enduring myth of "Johnny Appleseed," serve as a poignant reminder that food is more than mere sustenance; it has always been an integral part of New England's identity politics, past and present. As Muckenhoupt aptly puts it, "Instead of a colonizer roaming a ravaged landscape, he's a faithful, benevolent seed planter, a Pomona of the prairie – He didn't try to actually change how society worked by, say, joining the abolitionists or unionizing farmworkers" (252). In the final chapter, we glimpse the challenges faced by farmers even without Chapman's assistance. Cheesemakers, adopting European techniques and marketing strategies to craft and sell locally made, premium cheeses, sometimes find themselves at odds with traditional values and identities "They are practitioners of an extractive industry, akin to oilmen and lumberjacks, exploiting local resources to support cuisine favored by wealthier individuals residing far from these lands" (260).

In *The Truth about Baked Beans*, readers embark on a thought-provoking and enlightening journey through the history of New England's food, leaving them with a newfound appreciation for its complexity and potential for growth. Moreover, it sparks discussions about the future of New England's cuisine, as it encourages a more inclusive and open-minded approach to embracing the diverse influences that have shaped it. Muckenhoupt's rigorous approach, coupled with occasional sardonic and witty commentary, infuses a breath of fresh air into these tumultuous times. Nevertheless, the book does have its shortcomings, notably the absence of visual aids, and the potential for overwhelming readers with its detailed content. In its entirety, *The Truth about Baked Beans* is a formidable work appealing to scholars and readers from a wide array of backgrounds and interests, destined to stand the test of time.