

In Praise of Fast Food

by Rachel Laudan, from the book *The Gastronomica Reader*

Modern, fast, processed food is a disaster. That, at least, is the message conveyed by newspapers and magazines, on television programs, and in cookbooks. It is a mark of sophistication to bemoan the steel roller mill and supermarket bread while yearning for stone-ground flour and brick ovens; to seek out heirloom apples while despising modern tomatoes; to be hostile to agronomists who develop high-yielding crops and to home economists who invent recipes for General Mills.

My culinary style, like so many people's, was created by those who scorned industrialized food; culinary Luddites, we could call them, after the 19th-century English workers who abhorred the machines that were destroying their way of life. I learned to cook from the books of Elizabeth David, who urged us to sweep our cupboards "clean for ever of the cluttering debris of commercial sauce bottles and all synthetic aids to flavoring."

I rush to the newsstand to pick up *Saveur* with its promise to teach me to "savor a world of authentic cuisine."

Culinary Luddism has come to involve more than just taste, however; it has also presented itself as a moral and political crusade—and it is here that I begin to back off. The reason is not far to seek: because I am a historian.

As a historian I cannot accept the account of the past implied by this movement: the sunny, rural days of yore contrasted with the gray industrial present. It gains credence not from scholarship but from evocative dichotomies: fresh and natural versus processed and preserved; local versus global; slow versus fast; artisanal and traditional versus urban and industrial; healthful versus contaminated. History shows, I believe, that the Luddites have things back to front.

That food should be fresh and natural has become an article of faith. It comes as something of a shock to realize that this is a latter-day creed.

For our ancestors, natural was something quite nasty. Natural often tasted bad. Fresh meat was rank and tough, fresh fruits inedibly sour, fresh vegetables bitter. Natural was unreliable. Fresh milk soured; eggs went rotten. Everywhere seasons of plenty were followed by seasons of hunger. Natural was also usually indigestible. Grains, which supplied 50 to 90 percent of the calories in most societies, have to be threshed, ground, and cooked to make them edible.

So to make food tasty, safe, digestible, and healthy, our forebears bred, ground, soaked, leached, curdled, fermented, and cooked naturally occurring plants and animals until they were literally beaten into submission. They created sweet oranges and juicy apples and non-bitter legumes, happily abandoning their more natural but less tasty ancestors. They built granaries, dried their meat and their fruit, salted and smoked their fish, curdled and fermented their dairy

products, and cheerfully used additives and preservatives—sugar, salt, oil, vinegar, lye—to make edible foodstuffs.

Eating fresh, natural food was regarded with suspicion verging on horror; only the uncivilized, the poor, and the starving resorted to it. When the ancient Greeks took it as a sign of bad times if people were driven to eat greens and root vegetables, they were rehearsing common wisdom. Happiness was not a verdant Garden of Eden abounding in fresh fruits, but a securely locked storehouse jammed with preserved, processed foods.

As for slow food, it is easy to wax nostalgic about a time when families and friends met to relax over delicious food, and to forget that, far from being an invention of the late 20th century, fast food has been a mainstay of every society. Hunters tracking their prey, shepherds tending their flocks, soldiers on campaign, and farmers rushing to get in the harvest all needed food that could be eaten quickly and away from home. The Greeks roasted barley and ground it into a meal to eat straight or mixed with water, milk, or butter (as Tibetans still do), while the Aztecs ground roasted maize and mixed it with water (as Mexicans still do).

What about the idea that the best food was country food, handmade by artisans? That food came from the country goes without saying. The presumed corollary—that country people ate better than city dwellers—does not. Few who worked the land were independent peasants baking their own bread and salting down their own pig. Most were burdened with heavy taxes and rents paid in kind (that is, food); or worse, they were indentured, serfs, or slaves. They subsisted on what was left over, getting by on thin gruels and gritty flatbreads.

The dishes we call ethnic and assume to be of peasant origin were invented for the urban, or at least urbane, aristocrats who collected the surplus. This is as true of the lasagna of northern Italy as it is of the chicken korma of Mughal Delhi, the moo shu pork of imperial China, and the pilafs, stuffed vegetables, and baklava of the great Ottoman palace in Istanbul. Cities have always enjoyed the best food and have invariably been the focal points of culinary innovation.

Nor are most “traditional foods” very old. For every prized dish that goes back 2,000 years, a dozen have been invented in the last 200. The French baguette? A 20th-century phenomenon, adopted nationwide only after World War II. Greek moussaka? Created in the early 20th century in an attempt to Frenchify Greek food. Tequila? Promoted as the national drink of Mexico during the 1930s by the Mexican film industry. These are indisputable facts of history, though if you point them out you will be met with stares of disbelief.

Were old foods more healthful than ours? Inherent in this vague notion are several different claims, among them that foods were less dangerous, that diets were better balanced. Yet while we fret about pesticides on apples and mercury in tuna, we should remember that ingesting food is and always has been dangerous. Many plants contain both toxins and carcinogens. Grilling and frying add more. Bread was likely to be stretched with chalk, pepper adulterated with the sweepings of warehouse floors, and sausage stuffed with all the horrors famously exposed by Upton Sinclair in *The Jungle*.

By the standard measures of health and nutrition—life expectancy and height—our ancestors were far worse off than we are. Much of the blame was due to diet, exacerbated by living conditions and infections that affect the body's ability to use food. No amount of nostalgia for the pastoral foods of the distant past can wish away the fact that our ancestors lived mean, short lives, constantly afflicted with diseases, many of which can be directly attributed to what they did and did not eat.

Historical myths, though, can mislead as much by what they don't say as by what they do say—and nostalgia for the past typically glosses over the moral problems intrinsic to the labor of producing food. Most men were born to a life of labor in the fields, most women to a life of grinding, chopping, and cooking.

"Servitude," said my mother as she prepared home-cooked breakfast, dinner, and tea for 8 to 10 people 365 days a year. She was right. Churning butter and skinning and cleaning hares, without the option of picking up the phone for a pizza if something goes wrong, is unremitting, unforgiving toil. Perhaps, though, my mother did not realize how much worse her lot might have been. She could at least buy our bread. In Mexico, at the same time, women without servants could expect to spend five hours a day kneeling at the grindstone preparing the dough for the family's tortillas.

In the first half of the 20th century, Italians embraced factory-made pasta and canned tomatoes. In the second half, Japanese women welcomed factory-made bread because they could sleep a little longer instead of getting up to make rice. As supermarkets appeared in Eastern Europe, people rejoiced at the convenience of ready-made goods. For all, culinary modernism had proved what was wanted: food that was processed, preservable, industrial, novel, and fast, the food of the elite at a price everyone could afford. Where modern food became available, people grew taller and stronger and lived longer. Men had choices other than hard agricultural labor; women had choices other than kneeling at the metate five hours a day.

So the sunlit past of the culinary Luddites never existed. So their ethos is based not on history but on a fairy tale. So what? Certainly no one would deny that an industrialized food supply has its own problems. Perhaps we should eat more fresh, natural, local, artisanal, slow food. Does it matter if the history is not quite right?

It matters quite a bit, I believe. If we do not understand that most people had no choice but to devote their lives to growing and cooking food, we are incapable of comprehending that modern food allows us unparalleled choices not just of diet but of what to do with our lives. If we urge the Mexican to stay at her metate, the farmer to stay at his olive press, the housewife to stay at her stove, all so that we may eat handmade tortillas, traditionally pressed olive oil, and home-cooked meals, we are assuming the mantle of the aristocrats of old.

If we fail to understand how scant and monotonous most traditional diets were, we can misunderstand the "ethnic foods" we encounter in cookbooks, at restaurants, or on our travels.

We can represent the peoples of the Mediterranean, Southeast Asia, India, or Mexico as pawns at the mercy of multinational corporations bent on selling trashy modern products—failing to appreciate that, like us, they enjoy a choice of goods in the market. A Mexican friend, suffering from one too many foreign visitors who chided her because she offered Italian food, complained, “Why can’t we eat spaghetti, too?”

If we assume that good food maps neatly onto old or slow or homemade food, we miss the fact that lots of industrial foods are better. Certainly no one with a grindstone will ever produce chocolate as suave as that produced by conching in a machine for 72 hours. And let us not forget that the current popularity of Italian food owes much to two convenience foods that even purists love, factory pasta and canned tomatoes. Far from fleeing them, we should be clamoring for more high-quality industrial foods.

If we romanticize the past, we may miss the fact that it is the modern, global, industrial economy (not the local resources of the wintry country around New York, Boston, or Chicago) that allows us to savor traditional, fresh, and natural foods. Fresh and natural loom so large because we can take for granted the processed staples—salt, flour, sugar, chocolate, oils, coffee, tea—produced by food corporations.

Culinary Luddites are right, though, about two important things: We need to know how to prepare good food, and we need a culinary ethos. As far as good food goes, they’ve done us all a service by teaching us how to use the bounty delivered to us by (ironically) the global economy. Their ethos, though, is another matter. Were we able to turn back the clock, as they urge, most of us would be toiling all day in the fields or the kitchen; many of us would be starving.

Nostalgia is not what we need. What we need is an ethos that comes to terms with contemporary, industrialized food, not one that dismisses it; an ethos that opens choices for everyone, not one that closes them for many so that a few may enjoy their labor; and an ethos that does not prejudge, but decides case by case when natural is preferable to processed, fresh to preserved, old to new, slow to fast, artisanal to industrial. Such an ethos, and not a timorous Luddism, is what will impel us to create the matchless modern cuisines appropriate to our time.

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