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Review of Jodi Campbell, *At the First Table: Food and Social Identity in Early Modern Spain*

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Campbell, Jodi. *At the First Table: Food and Social Identity in Early Modern Spain*. Early Modern Cultural Studies Series. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. viii + 252 pp.

Food is becoming increasingly prominent in the historiographical landscape, and *At the First Table* takes its place among recent works by early modern historians like Ken Albala, E.C. Spary, Eric Dursteler, and Rebecca Earle. Campbell focuses more on eating than on food itself, and she uses the way that Spaniards ate and thought about eating as a way to explore Spanish society. She argues that in such a hierarchical and corporate system, eating was central to the performance of social difference.

To support this claim, Campbell has scraped together an impressively wide variety of sources. Diaries, dictionaries, literature, travel memoirs, medical treatises, social commentary, conduct books, rules of charitable institutions that doled out food to the poor, monastic regulation, legislation, urban regulation, Inquisition trials, records such as that of the *Sala de Alcaldes de Casa y Corte* that policed Madrid, and of course cookbooks. She even raided the *Indultos de Viernes Santo*, finding a surprising number of times that issues of food and eating emerged in witness testimony among these Good Friday Pardons. Into this she has interwoven the findings of Spanish historians and antiquarians, who have been fruitfully exploring foodways and daily life in pre-modern Spain for thirty years and more. Some foods and ways of eating leave more of paper trail for historians than others – fruit, for example, was a luxury and so not tracked by governing officials as they did the necessities of grain, oil, and wine. Campbell acknowledges that the written record steers *At the First Table* in the direction of the elite and townspeople at the expense of peasants.

Campbell funnels this broad but selective array of sources into a number of points about Spanish society. In the first chapter, she examines the hierarchy of foodstuffs in early modern Spain and finds that a range of medical, moral, legal, and practical concerns helped individual items find their cultural place. Wheat bread and wine held a position of absolute centrality, while tripe and fruits had a more ambiguous status, coveted despite the disapproval of medical and ethical critics. In the second chapter Campbell explores the role of eating in the formation of social identities. Jews and Muslims, whose conspicuously sizable presence in Spain made it somewhat unique in Christian Europe, are the most obvious examples of communities defined in part by food practices. I have always suspected that the contemporary Spanish emphasis on (obsession with?) ham is an atavistic symbol crying out, “We are not Jews or Muslims!” and *At the First Table* confirms this, finding its roots in the way that refraining from pork was an important way for *conversos* and *moriscos* to attract the suspicions of neighbors and the unwanted attention of the Inquisition. Furthermore, universities, monasteries, and religious confraternities all had rules about eating together and what members may or may not eat, when and how. Food practices helped demarcate gender roles, too, as women were meant to serve their husbands, but men might also eat out with other men, and in great households, as cooking became more prestigious, men took over the cooking and cookbook writing from women. Eating performances helped shape class, as well, since throwing and attending banquets was a mark of royalty and nobility, and this too changed over time as monarchs became more withdrawn from the company of their followers.

The third chapter explores the way that people ate in ways that defended, or

pursued, elite status. As exotic food like sugar and chocolate became ever less expensive and more available to the wealthy urban elite and even the not so wealthy, traditional aristocrats had to find new ways to put some distance between themselves and social climbers. Table manners increased in importance as an important status marker, and so did hunting and eating game as Spanish society became less rural, leaving the landed nobility clinging to this relic of elite status. There was also a shift away from emphasizing the quantity of food, so important for medieval banqueting, to the quality of the food, governed by good taste, which can be learned but not bought. Campbell uses the fourth chapter to examine the religious aspects of eating. Fasting had long roots throughout Christian Europe but lost its importance in Spain, especially by the eighteenth century. Meanwhile a new ethical commentary developed that juxtaposed the excesses of the court and mushrooming cities like Madrid to the imagined pastoral simplicity of rural Spain. Over this same period the emphasis on charitable food donations shifted from a symbolic donation of food from rich to poor as a ritual meant to display the giver's Christian merit to a concern for actually alleviating hunger among the ever increasing impoverished sections of the urban population. Meal sharing on a more quotidian level was a way to cement political relationships, bring communities together at funerals, promote courtship, and to simply demonstrate friendship. All the while moralists warned against gluttony, and in increasingly shrill terms as the Habsburg monarchy weakened and the Spanish economy faltered, making the wastage of food an easy target for both the decline of imperial moral fiber and the misallocation of resources.

Thus *At the First Table* is organized by theme, but in the conclusion Campbell points to some overarching trends stretching from the late fifteenth century to the eighteenth. Spanish food customs became more homogenous as the Jewish and Muslim populations and their converted descendants faded from view. Thinking about eating shifted from celebratory excesses to self-discipline and danger. Quantity was replaced by refinement, and the focal points of culturally important eating shifted from the royal court and monasteries to the cities. Throughout this 300-year period Campbell's main point stays on solid ground: people used food to express and demarcate their various identities.

One thing that Campbell does not explore much is the impact of the increasing market forces on food production and consumption, although it is implied in the increasing availability of once-exotic foods and in the central theme of increasing urbanization. And while Campbell amply explores the attempt by various governing officials to regulate who could eat what and when, there is not much on taxes, like the meat tax, that could also regulate and articulate social status. But what I really wish she had tackled more was famine and malnutrition. Nevertheless *At the First Table* would be a great book to assign to undergraduates as a way to explore early modern Spanish society and culture, and it would also be a brilliant introduction to pre-modern foodways in a survey course on food history.

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