



A Curious History of Food and Drink

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Ever wondered where noodles came from? How Worcester Sauce was invented? Or even who the 'Cucumber King of Burma' was? Beginning with the hippo soup eaten in Africa in 6000 BC, through to the dangerous blowfish enjoyed in contemporary Japan, A Curious History of Food and Drink reveals the bizarre origins of the food and drink consumed throughout history.

From the pheasant brains and flamingo tongues scoffed by the Roman emperor Vitellius, to the unusual uses of liquorice (once a treatment for sore feet) - Ian Crofton makes use of original sources - including journals, cookbooks and manuals - to reveal the bizarre, entertaining and informative stories behind the delicacies enjoyed by our ancestors.

A Curious History of Food and Drink Details

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From Reader Review A Curious History of Food and Drink for online ebook

Petra CigareX says

I've finished the book. It's liked tinned fruit salad. The desirable fruits, the cherries, are few and far between. Here's four of them:

1) We hear of waiters spitting in food when they find the customer troublesome. But this is even worse:

"In 1918, "Mickey Finn powder" featured in a criminal case involving a large number of Chicago waiters who had been administering a powder containing antimony and potassium tartrate to customers whose tips they considered to be insufficiently generous. Those so poisoned suffered headaches, dizziness, and vomiting, and some may even have died. Two people were arrested for manufacturing the powder, and two bartenders were charged with selling the powder at the headquarters of the waiters' union."

2) Who knew that fried fish was first introduced into England by the Marranos (exiled Portuguese Jews) in the 16thC and that the first fish and chip shop was opened in 1860 by Joseph Malin, a Jewish immigrant from Eastern Europe who began to sell fried fish alongside chipped potatoes at his establishment in London's East End. By the late 1920s, there were some thirty-five thousand fish and chip shops across Britain.

And I thought it was the quintessential English food!

3) Among the clergy in the Catholic Church it seems plus ça change... but they took it further back then!

Cardinal Giovan Maria del Monte as Pope Julius III. As a younger man, del Monte had allegedly fathered over a hundred illegitimate children, but then, on being admonished by his mother, swore he would thenceforward abjure the company of women and stick to boys. He was as good as his word, and on becoming pope presented a cardinal's red hat to his seventeen-year-old male lover, a monkey trainer by trade.

4) How to get rid of your love rival. Tried and tested! (Do not read if eating or drinking or if you don't blame me if you feel ill or snork your food). This is just so..... vile. :-)

"Early in her career as a royal mistress, Nell Gwyn was faced with a rival for the favors of Charles II, in the form of another actress, Moll Davis. With the aid of her friend, the playwright Aphra Behn, Miss Gwyn devised a way of dealing once and for all with Miss Davis:

Nell Gwyn having notice that Miss Davis was to be entertain'd at night, by the King in his bed chamber, she invited the lady to a collation of sweetmeats, which being made up with physical ingredients [i.e., a powerful laxative], the effects thereof had such an operation upon the harlot, when the King was caressing her in bed with the amorous sports of Venus, that a violent and sudden looseness obliging her Ladyship to discharge her artillery, she made the King, as well as herself, in a most lamentable pickle; which caused her Royal Master to turn her off, with the small pension of a thousand pounds per annum, in consideration for her former services in the affairs of love; after which she never appear'd again at Court."

Captain Alexander Smith, The School of Venus, or, Cupid restor'd to Sight: being a history of Cuckolds and Cuckold-makers (1716)

Nasty pair of women, but you have to laugh.

So not really a good book, but there were some "cherries".

Patty says

A fun book to dip into now and then to learn a little bit more about our food habits through the ages.

Anne says

I picked this up after seeing it on Entertainment Weekly's "Must List" and I have to say I have no idea what the editors are smoking (I suspect they didn't actually try to read it cover to cover).

Ok, so it was mildly entertaining (thus my three stars) what with all the short, crazy tidbits about food and "food." But, it was not entertaining enough to make up for some serious flaws. The biggest of which includes no source citations and a stunning lack of context. There were a few too many times where the author said "the story goes" but would finish with "but it's probably not true" and that, combined with a lack of citations made me start to doubt the veracity of any of the tidbits!

The amusement peaked for me in the 18th century because things were still pretty weird, but not so strange that I needed some background to fill in the cracks. The stuff before the 18th century seemed pretty crazy and just begged for more detail. The 19th century to present just made me question his research methodology because I think I'd heard some of that already.

Anyway, reading this was not a horrible way to pass some time. It was super easy to pick up and put down between all the other things I was reading at the time. But from here on I'm going to be more skeptical of EW recommendations!

Andrea James says

This is a bathroom-reading type of book - a miscellany of odd little tales and tiny snippets of history. I found the early history somewhat meh so after about 15 pages I switched to the back of the book and the pace picked up considerably.

Here's an excerpt from the entry for 1941:

Following the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, the Agricultural Experiment Station at Pavlovsk near St Petersburg (then known as Leningrad) fell into German hands. Happily, by this stage Soviet scientists had managed to transfer the station's vast and unique collection of tubers and seeds to a location within Leningrad itself. The city then endured a terrible 872-day siege at the hands of the Nazis.

The siege was not lifted until 1944, by which time a million civilians had died, the majority from hunger. Among the dead were the 12 scientists looking after the Pavlovsk collection, who preferred to starve to death rather than eat the seeds and tubers in their care, which they regarded as belonging to humanity as a whole.

The Pavlovsk Station continues to be of global importance, containing over 5000 varieties of seeds, especially of strawberries, blackcurrents, gooseberries, apples and cherries. However, in 2010 the station came under threat from a property developer who wanted to build private homes on the land. The developer argued that because the station contained a 'priceless collection', it had no monetary value and was therefore worthless. Joining in the kafka-esque spirit of the affair, the Russian government's Federal Fund of Residential Real Estate Development (FFRRED) argues that as the collection was never registered, it did not officially exist.

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Yeowzer. How gutting is that?

And 1985's entry:

Bill Rathje, a professor at the University of Arizonam concluded from his analysis of discarded stalks in people's garbage, that "the higher your income the higher up the stalk you cut off the tip.

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And that's of course if you can afford asparagus at all. I'm usually loathe to cut any of it off.

1870:

During the winter of 1870-1, as the four-month siege of Paris by the Prussian army tightened, the beleaguered citizens resorted to all kinds of novel foods to keep themselves from starvation. Henry Labouchere, the correspondent for the London Daily News, described some of the more popular dishes: Cat - 'Something between rabbit and squirrel, with a flavour all its own'

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So there you have it, cat doesn't taste like chicken!

1967:

'To deprive a Dane of his boiled potatoes' wrote Nika Hazelton in Danish Cooking, 'would be as cruel as depriving a baby its bottle.'

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Replace 'boil' with 'roast' and that pretty much describes my boyfriend.

And finally, I've been wondering just how true it is that hippo is delicious since I read about its marvellousness in this book. Maybe I can find a way to have Escobar's hippos...

Jan says

Bizarre foods and beverages through the ages are historically reported. A great deal of research must have gone into this collection covering prehistory through present day. Coffee was Satan's drink, licorice was a treatment for sore feet, swans were the most costly food in the middle ages, Garibaldi biscuits were known as "fly cemeteries" because of the raisins, most people were anti-pork in the early 1900s, and a few memorable recipes including one for Haggis, none of which I'll be making any time soon.

Kevin says

Short pieces about food some humorous, some disgusting by modern standards are setup like:

1906

Some Devil's Definitions Ambrose Bierce supplied the following definition in his Devil's Dictionary:

MACARONI, n. An Italian food made in the form of a slender, hollow tube. It consists of two parts—the tubing and the hole, the latter being the part that digests.

In the 1911 Enlarged Devil's Dictionary, we find the following definitions:

CUSTARD, n. A detestable substance produced by a malevolent conspiracy of the hen, the cow and the cook.

RHUBARB, n. Vegetable essence of stomach ache.

* * *

Unrelatedly, the first Artichoke Queen, crowned in 1948 at the Artichoke Festival held in Castroville, California, was a certain Norma Jean Baker—later better known as Marilyn Monroe.

1956

Matzoh Balls When dining at the parents of her new husband, Arthur Miller, Marilyn Monroe was offered matzoh balls. According to oral tradition, she replied, "Isn't there another part of the matzoh you can eat?"

Tomixaroma says

If you like a book that mainly talks about Britain and analyses (almost) everything from a British point of view than this is for you, but not for me.

Ron says

What is most curious to me is how these kinds of books get published. I am glad they do, for they are perfect (for me) reading-in-bed-until-my-eyes-get-heavy books. So, it is a compendium, historically organized, of bits and pieces of information about food and drink: the weird things Romans ate (larks' tongues) and how they paid soldier in salt, hence "salary;" medieval tables manners (don't blow your nose on the tablecloth); weird medieval menus; how famous writers shat on foreign food they ate in their travels – stuff like that.

It was fun enough to read as I fell asleep at night

I shall remember very little. Even the things I cited I had to look up as I was writing. A toss-away concoction, hence my curiosity about what the publisher was thinking when he gave the contract.

Stewart Tame says

A fun miscellany of various food facts, from the dawn of history to the present day. I've always wondered just how a book like this gets researched, because Crofton's sources are so incredibly diverse. Yes, some people probably did prior research that could be built upon, but still ... in addition to straight up history books, you'd need to consult art history, culinary history, literature, theatrical history ... Crofton is either a polymath, or just really, really good at research. Some of these stories seem a bit dubious, but there are more than a few cases where I know Crofton has gone the extra mile to ferret out the real story. This is not a deep book, certainly, but it is an entertaining one. Recommended!

Stephanie says

Informative but sparsely written

There is a good deal of information presented, but not with any panache. Most of what you learn is in list form given to you as direct quotes from source material. Interesting but uninspiring.

Karen! says

This is definitely a miscellany. A miscellany that also forms a bit of a micro-history. While certainly there is no overarching plot or story to be found herein, the progression can certainly be seen through the meticulously researched tidbits that are related.

43 B.C.--Marcus Tullius Cicero had ancestors given the name "Cicero" because of a blemish on the forefather's nose that resembled a chickpea. The Roman name "Lentulus" came from lentil.

800 --A combination of garlic, bitter herbs, leeks, fennel, butter, and mutton fat was believed by the Anglo-Saxons to protect against malevolent elves.

1150--During a civil war in England, coin was not reliably available, so debts were paid in spices...peppercorn rent

1154--Pasta arrives in Italy

1188--The Catholic Church allows a dispensation during Lent for eating barnacle geese, as they clearly

counted as fish (they were named after barnacles, after all!) Of course, the Church also gave a dispensation in Venezuela for capybara, because the world's largest rodent is often seen in water.

1284--King Alfonso X of Leon and Galicia, when ill, was advised to eat snacks between meals to soak up all of the wine that he was constantly drinking. Feeling the benefits, he decreed that all taverns could not serve wine without also serving a "lid" of food on each glass. Lid, being "Tapa," Tapas was born!

1453--During guerrilla war with the Ottoman Turks, the Greeks took to the mountains. They stole sheep and cooked them by a method that did not cause much smoke, so as to remain hidden. Known as the "klephths," this is not only the derivation of the name for the Greek lamb dish Kleftiko, but also the English word kleptomania.

1505--Vindaloo was not a native Indian dish, but was developed by a Portuguese colony in Goa.

1570--The first pizza in Naples is written about...before tomatoes are introduced to Italy from the new world

1580--Dutch merchants, to save money and space, distilled wine to ship by sea; the intention being that the concentrate would be diluted on arrival to return to wine. But they drank it on its own, finding it had a quality all its own: Brandy.

1644--The Puritan Parliament during the English Civil War bans the Papist rite of Christmas. To cut to the root of the problem, "the invention of the Scarlet Whore of Babylon," namely mince pies and plum pudding, were specifically outlawed. Technically, they are still illegal, as the law is still on the books.

1668--A young Benedictine monk named Dom Perignon joined the Abbey of Hautvillers, near Epernay in Champagne, and went on to become the abbey's cellar master, a post he held until his death in 1715. Legend has it that it was Dom Perignon who created the first champagne, by forcing bubbles into white wine. This was not in fact the case, but he did much to enhance the quality of wines produced by the abbey, improving the naturally bubbly wine, using corks to preserve the bubbles, and blending his grapes to produce a light white, rather than the heavy red traditional in the region. There is a story that when he first tried his new improved wine he exclaimed, "Come quickly, I am tasting the stars!"

1678--Cornelis Bontekoe suggested that to maintain health one should drink a minimum of eight to ten cups of tea per day, and that fifty or even two hundred cups would not be excessive.

1694--Picnic comes from the French "piquer" meaning to steal or pilfer and "nique," a small copper coin worth virtually nothing at all.

1715--Hors d'oeuvre means "outside the work," denoting any small building outside of the architect's original plan, such as an outhouse. By 1740, it came to mean anything outside of the normal meal used to stimulate the palate.

1736--In Britain, the Gin Act imposed high taxes on the increasingly popular spirit, leading to riots. To get around the letter of the law, retailers sold gin under false names, including: Cuckold's Comfort, Ladies' Delight, the Balk, Cholic, Grape Waters, and King Theodore of Corsica. The authorities were not deceived.

1857--Pete Conklin invents pink lemonade. The original secret ingredient? a bucket of water in which a horse rider had soaked his red tights.

1889--Queen Margherita, on visiting Naples, wanted to try the local delicacy. Raffaele Esposito visited the royal palace of Capodimonte made three basic varieties: olive oil, whitebait, and tomatoes. At the last minute, he added mozzarella and a bit of basil to make the red, white, and green of the newly united Italian flag. Her favorite, it was named in her honor, making pizza acceptable outside of the Naples slums.

1937--Spam, made as rations for WWII, was referred to by troops as "ham that didn't pass its physical" and "meatloaf without basic training."

1970--Andre Simon, quoted as saying "A man dies too young if he leaves any wine in his cellar," died at 93 with only 2 magnums of claret remaining.

2001--George W. Bush's first action on taking office was to add a menu item at the White House: peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

Indah Threez Lestari says

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Julie says

The Curious History of Food and Drink by Ian Crofton is a 2013 Quercus publication. I was provided a copy of this book by the publisher and Edelweiss in exchange for an honest review.

This book begins all the way back to the ancient world and hippo soup and continues on up to the 21st century. There are some interesting facts about how certain foods got their name and how they became popular. Brandy, frankfurters, uses for potatoes, which interestingly enough were thought of as a cure for warts by the Scots.

The middle ages and the 15th- 17th centuries were the most interesting chapters in the book for me. I did enjoy the 18th century and its breakdown of alcohol and society . The 19th century visits "The Cook and Housewife's Manual" which became a popular Scottish recipe book. These recipes do not sound all that appetizing however.

The 20th century chapter gave us some interesting fads in food and drink- one interesting dish for women only was the "Ultravirile" consisting of cock's comb and fried testicle. Yum!

This chapter also gives up the history of SPAM- not the type you get in your email. - This is very interesting chapter and like many of you when I think of SPAM I wrinkle my nose My aunt used to fry SPAM in a skillet and serve it as the "meat" for the meal. I never acquired a taste for it.

The 21st century gives us the most expensive salad which included caviar and lobster, the accidental invention of the microwave.

While there are many interesting tidbits in the book it could be rather dry reading at times and the book did not focus solely on one country. France and Britain were featured prominently as was Scotland on occasion. I actually found reading about foods and preparations from other countries rather interesting, however the author's choices and analysis were a little strange.

This would be a good book for thumb through for entertainment purposes but it probably isn't for everyone. I

thought the author went out of his way to find the grossest recipes he could. But, if that's the way people did things back then in certain countries then I suppose it should have been mentioned. However, you should be prepared to lose your appetite a time or two. I'm waffling on the rating for this one. I think I will settle for a 3 star rating. This book wasn't bad and really did have some interesting stories you probably wouldn't read about anywhere else, but there was nothing here that makes me want to excitedly recommend this book to others. So, if you are a history buff or a trivia lover I think you would find this book interesting enough for a look see. Otherwise this one falls into that lukewarm, take or leave it area.

Michelle says

Interesting, but written in a disjointed way.

n says

I had been expecting something different; a more coherent book on the history of food and drink through the ages (as the book implies). It's more little tidbits of info under a date. Still interesting and I learned new things, hence the 3 stars! A little disappointing however, lacks a flow and is succinct on info.
