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Introduction: Bringing More to the Table

Karen Bescherer Metheny

Introduction

Archaeology and the archaeological sciences increasingly contribute to the knowledge of food preparation and consumption in historic-period households and communities, offering insights into what was consumed and how it was prepared. In this volume, contributors build upon the archaeological evidence using an anthropological framework of analysis to examine the context and meaning of meals and food-related practices. Using food remains and material objects, oral narratives, archival and other documentary sources (recipes and cookbooks, novels, print media), genre paintings, and other lines of evidence, the authors address questions related to community and household structure, gender, ethnicity, age, economic status, and social discourse. Changes in foodways practices and material culture are discussed in the context of broader social, cultural, and technological change. The approaches offered here suggest that archaeologists can do more to reconstruct past foodways and to interpret the social, economic, and cultural significance of these practices.

Foodways are a natural subject of study in archaeology. Following Jay Anderson (1971: xl), foodways may be defined as the range of cultural, social, and economic practices shared by a group in the conceptualization, production, and consumption of food. Broadly speaking, this includes activities from gathering or foraging, hunting, subsistence gardening and agriculture, store purchases, and barter and exchange, to food preservation and storage, to preparation, presentation, consumption, and, finally, discard. Given that archaeological deposits at historical sites often contain evidence of food remains and quantities of food-related material culture, and given the wealth of documentary sources available, it is surprising that archaeologists do not do more to interpret foodways practices. Archaeologists excel at teasing out information based on residues, butchery cut marks, seeds, and microremains—information that tells us what cuts of meat or raw ingredients, even spices, were consumed. We discuss subsistence

and nutrition by analyzing individual components of meals, we elicit economic data from price lists and discuss consumer choice based on the selection of meats and household goods, and we analyze the visual elements of food consumption and display, from table settings to tea wares, as evidence of socioeconomic status. We are less willing or prepared to talk about the meal as a whole, the context in which food was eaten or tea and alcohol imbibed, or the significance of social relations associated with those meals. We are also reluctant to broach the sensorial and communicative aspects of food and food-related material culture.

Because food is more than subsistence, and because foodways intersect with a host of cultural and social practices, as well as gender, ethnicity, and other identities, it is important for historical archaeologists to give greater consideration to the role of food and foodways in daily life. A closer examination of foodways can provide information about the spectrum of relationships that are defined and reinforced in the context of food-related activities, whether economic transactions associated with food procurement; task sharing associated with food production and preparation among household members; social, political, or cultural networks and connections that are in play at the dinner table; or the enactment of hierarchical relationships through the symbolic or sensorial aspects of food and dining. A study of foodways practices also reveals that food consumption is not only a socially significant behavior, but is also a multilayered performance in which both tacit and spoken communication are enhanced by the very qualities of the food—taste, texture, temperature—and the context in which it is served, from seating arrangements to presentation, to the material culture of dining.

The papers in this volume not only demonstrate the power of an expanded interpretive focus, but provide practical suggestions on how archaeologists can bring more to this area of research from both methodological and theoretical perspectives. One of the most exciting aspects of this volume is that the bulk of the

research presented involves work with existing collections, some of which are decades old, or with data recovered through cultural resource management projects that typically are constrained in terms of recovery, funding, and time. As such, the offerings here are inspiring examples of how to do more with what we have. The success of these studies lies in the willingness of their authors to weave together disparate sources and to incorporate data sets with which archaeologists are already familiar (e.g., genre paintings, contemporary literature, period cookbooks), but with an innovative and creative eye. Each of the nine studies in this volume uses an anthropological framework of analysis to examine the context of food procurement, preparation, and consumption, and the many relationships and discourses that are embedded in such practices. The authors are conducting what amounts to an historical anthropology of foodways in households, institutions, and communities. In so doing, they are pushing interpretive boundaries to examine food as subsistence, but also food as metaphorical nourishment and sustenance, and food as an expressive medium.

This volume begins with four case studies that build from traditional archaeological and documentary sources, but use a new or altered interpretive focus to understand better the significance of site-specific foodways practices. In "The Power of Choice: Reflections of Economic Ability, Status, and Ethnicity in the Foodways of a Free African American Family in Northwestern New Jersey," Megan E. Springate and Amy K. Raes explore the role of food and foodways in a free African American household in the context of social, economic, and racial power structures in 19th-century New Jersey. They argue that the day-to-day choices made by the Mann household regarding food procurement and consumption—choices made evident in the types of faunal remains and methods of processing, and in the selection and use of tablewares and serving vessels recovered from the site—reflect the struggles of family members as they confronted discrimination and negotiated the tensions associated with being free African Americans in a largely white community. But Springate and Raes also contend that foodways were an important vehicle through which the Manns expressed their identity to

the community and negotiated their position within that community. Here the authors draw on existing social theory, the writings of W. E. B. Du Bois, and Chela Sandoval's (1991) theory of "differential consciousness." As summarized by the authors, Sandoval posits that humans are able "to survive and operate within oppressive environments, while at the same time developing beliefs and tactics to resist domination and oppression" (10). Springate and Raes make a compelling argument that the foodways practices of the Mann household encapsulate a discourse over race and power structures in 19th-century Deckertown (now Sussex Borough), New Jersey. Using comparative data from the sites of other free African American households in the Middle Atlantic, the authors further contend that food and foodways were core elements of an African American identity during this period, simultaneously serving the process of identity formation and cultural expression, even as foodways practices functioned as a means of negotiation and resistance. This dualism suggests a level of complexity to foodways that archaeologists have yet to articulate fully.

Two case studies link the archaeological evidence of food preparation and consumption to period and regional foodways practices using contemporary print media and visual representations. In "Dining with John and Catharine Butler before the Close of the Eighteenth Century," Eva MacDonald and Suzanne Needs-Howarth take a creative approach to the reconstruction of historic-period foodways by positing a hypothetical dinner hosted by the Butler family at their home in Newark, Upper Canada (now Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario). They interpret the vast quantities of zooarchaeological data and material culture remains recovered from the Butler site within the context of the Georgian meal system as reconstructed from period cookbooks. Hannah Glasse's (1774) *Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*, in particular, provides context for taxa (wild and domestic) recovered from the site and the butchery cuts associated with food processing, but also links the archaeological data to prepared foods or dishes from the period, methods of preparation, portion size, as well as menus and order of service. The hypothetical menu includes such

dishes as venison haunch, legs of beef, fish, pigeon, and game birds. The reconstructed dinner allows consideration of the individual components (e.g., faunal remains, ceramic vessels, stemware) as related parts of a meal—a dining experience involving hosts and guests, a menu, standards of service and dining etiquette, as well as a variety of dishes prepared, served, displayed, and eaten in such a way as to enact and reinforce the middle-class status and social standing of the Butler family.

In “Historic Philadelphia Foodways: A Consideration of Catfish Cookery,” Teagan Schweitzer focuses on the cultural significance of catfish remains recovered from excavations at seven Philadelphia sites dating from 1750 to 1850. The assemblages, some of which were excavated several decades ago, come from city taverns and from domestic sites spanning a range of socioeconomic classes. To understand the culinary significance of the catfish remains, Schweitzer contextualizes the archaeological data using contemporary print sources—newspapers, political discussions, tourist reviews, advertisements, fishing guides, fishing and agricultural bulletins issued by the commonwealth—along with engravings, photographs, and other graphic sources. In so doing, Schweitzer has reconstructed the history of a long-lost regional specialty, “catfish and waffles,” as well as aspects of the culinary, social, and political landscape of Philadelphia during this period.

In “Consumerism and Control: Archaeological Perspectives on the Harvard College Buttery,” Christina J. Hodge looks at the role of food provisioning and consumption in social, economic, and political discourse at colonial Harvard through the lens of the “buttery,” a commissary established by the college to allow students to supplement mandatory institutional meals known as commons. Rather than looking at exchanges through the buttery as examples of supply and demand, however, Hodge argues that the transactions through this market reflect the tensions between institutional regulation and oversight, and acts of resistance and negotiation by students. Following the work of Appadurai, Bourdieu, Certeau, Foucault, and others who have articulated theories concerning the intersection of institutional or societal structure and individual experience, Hodge interprets the

disjunctions between the archaeological data (compiled from several middens linked to student consumption) and the documentary record (provisioning lists, account books, college regulations) as evidence of an alternate economy within Harvard’s institutional structure. The presence or absence of tea wares, wine bottles, and tobacco-pipe fragments, interpreted as evidence of a negotiated, “improvisational” consumerism, reveal the intersection of food and power—subversion and resistance (illicit behaviors), but also negotiated behavior in response to control and surveillance.

Several articles highlight the importance of interpreting site-specific evidence in the context of the broader social, cultural, political, and technological trends of the period. In “Op Ed: The Influence of New Technologies, Foods, and Print Media on Local Material Culture Remains in Nineteenth-Century America,” Marie-Lorraine Pipes and Meta Janowitz consider the information revolution of the 19th century and explore the impact of print and visual media upon consumer behavior in 19th-century households. In their survey of these sources, particularly advertisements, cookbooks, and genre paintings, Pipes and Janowitz evaluate factors, such as the availability, frequency, and range of distribution, the longevity of media sources, the targets of specific forms of media, and the types of information each form attempted to convey. Such sources are traditionally used by archaeologists to discuss availability and price, but Pipes and Janowitz argue that they are also relevant for understanding the processes through which new foods and food technologies were introduced and accepted into households, as well as the spread of the social and cultural values that were embedded within those foods and goods. The latter, whether expressions of ideas of morality, themes of modernization, notions of hygiene, or nostalgia for past practice and, thus, perceived values, reveal not only broader cultural, demographic, and social trends, but such ideas can be connected to the life cycles of families and to specific practices of households and communities.

In “Decline in the Use and Production of Red-Earthenware Cooking Vessels in the Northeast, 1780–1880,” Meta Janowitz examines trends in redware production in the context of larger socioeconomic, technological, and

cultural changes. Janowitz scrutinizes several explanations for the decline in the quantities of redware vessels that has been observed at 19th-century archaeological sites in the Northeast, and weighs such factors as availability, cost, need, and function. She concludes that the downward trend in redware production and use was very much a factor of technological change, specifically the transition from hearth cooking to stove technology, and argues further that this technological shift likely had greater impact on redware usage than more commonly accepted explanations, such as a fear of lead-glaze poisoning or the relative cost of redware to stoneware. Janowitz then steps back to examine the significance of these broader trends on household behavior and argues that archaeologists need to understand and incorporate such contextualized knowledge into our interpretations of households and communities.

The last group of papers offers innovative methodological approaches to the study of historical foodways. In "Applying Concepts from Historical Archaeology to New England's Nineteenth-Century Cookbooks," Anne Yentsch offers a richly detailed analysis of print sources that has direct applicability to the remains found at archaeological sites, whether the seeds of fruit, condiment jars, or the remnants of iron cookstoves and cooking vessels. This study begins with a repurposing of the technique of seriation for the study of 19th-century New England cookbooks. Yentsch's approach allows her to delineate trends in the use of specific ingredients, including fruits, such as pineapple and banana, and coffee, spices, and foodstuffs that were often classified as "exotic" or "cultural other" in 19th-century New England households (e.g., fig and pomegranate); transitions in cooking methods such as boiling or baking puddings; the preparation of composite dishes (e.g., prepared dishes that require different, sequential methods of heating or cooking to complete them); and shifts in ideas about what was appropriate to eat (sweet or savory) and when (menu/order of service), as well as what was good (culturally appropriate) to eat. By examining contemporary documents, including shipping notices, advertisements, and prescriptive literature of the period, Yentsch is able to link these trends to availability and

to technological changes, as well as to social, religious, and cultural beliefs of the period, including ideas about health, wellbeing, morality, and cultural identity that were in play in New England at this time. Equally important, she documents a lag time between the market availability of ingredients and their appearance in contemporary regional cookbooks, a caution to archaeologists who rely primarily on cookbooks, food histories, or secondary sources to interpret period foodways. This exercise further highlights the problems archaeologists and food historians create when availability is conflated with presence or use, and emphasizes the importance of contextualizing foodways practices using as many lines of evidence as are available.

In "Modeling Communities Through Food: Connecting the Daily Meal to the Construction of Place and Identity," Karen Metheny applies food mapping and other visualization techniques used by anthropologists, ethnographers, cultural geographers, and other social theorists to chart the spatial relationships associated with food-related tasks and food sharing in the late 19th- to mid-20th-century coal-mining community of Helvetia, Pennsylvania. Though archaeologists have given considerable attention to feasting and formal dining, Metheny contends that it is as important to analyze and interpret the daily meal as it is to study feasting, and that the most ordinary meal—whether a snack, the miner's meal, or the family dinner—is integral to the creation of identity and place, and the larger process of community formation. Metheny uses oral histories, archaeological data, and archival sources to delineate and then graph the linkages or connections among people, food events, and the spaces associated with daily food tasks (procurement and preparation) and food consumption. The maps reveal a multiplicity of networks, boundaries, and relationships that varied based on ethnicity, gender, age, sex, and other factors. These connections were created and maintained in the context of the daily meal, suggesting that daily food sharing has implications for understanding the processes through which ethnic, gendered, and other identities are created, maintained, and reinforced; the importance of kin networks and alliances to individual and family wellbeing and community stability; the manifestations of social, economic, and gendered status and hierarchy within households and

communities; and the exercise of economic and political power.

Finally, in "Feasting on Broken Glass: Making a Meal of Seeds, Bones, and Sherds," Mary C. Beaudry proposes a study of the material and sensorial practices of dining using multiple lines of evidence to reconstruct and interpret not just the nutritional content of the meal, but the dining experience as a whole. Beaudry reexamines the archaeological evidence from two specific occupations dating to the late 18th- and early 19th centuries at the Spencer-Peirce-Little Farm in Newbury, Massachusetts, so as to bring into focus the evidence for feasting and dining, and to explore the significance of such practices. Through discussions of certain types of material culture (e.g., stemware or flatware) and specific prepared dishes (e.g., pigeon pie, a spit-roasted haunch of beef, a roast suckling pig), Beaudry reminds archaeologists that meals are much more than their constituent elements. Rather, dining and, in particular, feasting embody elements of sociality, discourse, entertainment, and sensorial enjoyment. By gathering and integrating all data sets related to dining (botanical and faunal remains, material culture assemblages, historical documents, architectural and spatial information) into "assemblages of practice," she argues that archaeologists will be better able to interpret the sociality, the sensoriality, and the meaning of the dining experience.

The articles in this volume demonstrate that much can be gained by changing the questions we ask, by asking more of the data, and by integrating the multiple lines of evidence that are available to us to contextualize period foodways. Archaeologists may usefully draw from a range of scholarly works by social scientists, as well as from the emergent field of food studies. There is a vast literature available to us that offers many useful theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of food and foodways; as this volume shows, familiarity with this body of scholarly work allows us to examine or reexamine our data with a new eye for both the content and context of the meal. The methods and approaches presented here also have very practical considerations. As Pipes and Janowitz note, funding and time constraints in public archaeology and mitigation projects make it imperative that we not only

accomplish more with the data that are extracted during recovery, but that we frame appropriate research questions before work begins. Similarly, these articles demonstrate the value of work with existing collections, even archaeological data that are decades old. The offerings in this volume suggest the potential of a food-centered approach, from the reconstruction of foodways practices to an understanding of the complexity and significance of meals in all forms. Together they suggest that archaeologists can and should bring more to the table.

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