

BOOK REVIEW

Tarulevicz, Nicole. *Eating Her Curries and Kway: A Cultural History of Food in Singapore*. Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2013.

Nicole Tarulevicz opens her book about food in Singapore with a key question: How does food become its own form of rule-making? She ends the book with the observation that rules are central to life in Singapore. Between these two points, she brings to bear a wide range of evidence concerning food in this unique city state where the relation between food and nation is especially strong. Singapore is a society in which rules and regulations matter, a truly prescriptive society that monitors cultural heritage, the family and the body.

Chapter One provides a brief history of Singapore within broader world history. The chapter works through a standard periodisation of Singaporean history, with attention to precolonial, colonial, Japanese occupation, to independence in 1965, and then reframes the history through food. For example, the British surrender to the Japanese in 1942 was followed by a period of food scarcity that no doubt shaped Singaporeans approach to food. Uninhabited until the 19th century, Singapore has no distinct precolonial history. Moving from trading post to crown colony, Singapore always remained a commercial space, never an agricultural space. The lack of food production shaped the food system throughout Singaporean history. The chapter also describes the exclusively white spaces of empire, including churches, post offices, hotels and civil service buildings.

Chapter Two explores Singapore's colonial heritage and the multiracial nature of the state using the metaphor of *rojak*, a mixed vegetable salad where each ingredient keeps its shape and distinct taste, as in an ethnically plural society (with the culinary exclusion of migrant workers). The chapter argues that foods and meals become markers of power, cultural capital, class and ethnic or racial identity. The cosmopolitanism created by Singapore's port status emphasises the city as stopover, as a place to shop. Attempts to bridge heritage and modernity are complicated by the nostalgic celebration of a past that never was. High tea at Raffles Hotel makes it difficult to remove the colonial narrative from the history of the modern globalised postcolonial nation. However, not all food memories are real as the discussion of culinary fake lore illustrates.

Chapter Three reads contemporary policy about the regulation of public space and food hygiene against the backdrop of colonial policy and anxieties, where community is formed at the shared table or favourite stall. Public space includes botanical gardens and orchid breeding programs as icons of luxury and colonial mastery. The colonial fear of the native body, including the threat of interracial liaisons, encouraged street grids with clearly defined sections for racial and occupational groups established by colonial authority. Since 87 percent of Singaporeans live in public housing, the state is better able to regulate personal hygiene, cleanliness and neatness as issues of morality. Clean, neat, punctual and well-mannered citizens do not litter, chew gum, cross-dress or urinate in elevators, on pain of fines and public humiliation. Part of the efforts to create order include regulations that destroyed and/or preserved street food hawking in Singapore by licensing vendors and bringing them in to food courts. These hawker centres are critically important in Singapore where more meals are eaten in public than in the home. Efforts to "hook the happy hawker" no doubt preserved the livelihood of many vendors, but they also reinforced the idea of street food as carrier of disease. These efforts to remake public eating space removed the street stalls, emblematic of disorder, from the foodscape of Singapore, in contrast to the less regulated foodscape in other Southeast Asian countries.

Chapter Four examines the marginalised domestic Singaporean kitchen. There has been little scholarly attention on kitchens in food studies. The reviewer tried to address this gap in *Food Culture in Southeast Asia* (2008), but also found very few resources. The absence of interest in kitchens is surprising considering how deeply Singaporeans in particular and Southeast Asians in general care about food, but not where food is prepared. Kitchens are marginal working spaces used by maids, not status symbols or recreational spaces. Cooking is not a valued leisure activity among citizens who have convenient access to hawker courts.

Chapter Five uses written documents such as advice manuals, government issued text books and magazines from the colonial and post-colonial period to examine how home economics developed as a site of national identity building, including gender and racial constructions. Tarulevicz shows how home economics textbooks and cookbooks evoke a colonial British kitchen very different from the dry indoor kitchens and wet outdoor kitchens of Singapore. These documents tell the reader how to do something—manage domestic staff, bake a cake, reuse leftovers, in short, how to make an ideal and safe home. The government handbook on food safety sponsored by Nestle, Singapore, is a reminder of the dominance of that food corporation in Singapore, as in other colonial cities.

The British framing in authentic Singaporean cookbooks is the subject of Chapter Six. The author reviews how cookbooks as cultural guides become markers of social status, carrying symbolic culinary value. But Britishness was impossible to fulfil in Singapore; considering the tropical heat and humidity, ovens were not a part of kitchens. Cookbook writers lacked knowledge of the colonial kitchen and local Malay foods. Both garlic and curries have very different values in Singapore and London, for example. The book makes no attempt to lock down the traditional, the original the authentic, in this centre of fusion and hybrid food; in Singapore, the borrowed is the authentic, she notes. *Peranakan* food, a fusion of Chinese and Malay dishes, is the classic example. In Singaporean eyes, it is better to eat out than marry out, a hint about marriage and sexuality that presages her concluding argument about food as a substitute for sex. Confinement cookbooks are an interesting example of ethnic distinctiveness. Foods cooked by a confinement specialist who helps the mother with the new baby reveal similarities and differences between Chinese, Malay and Indian confinement practices. For example, Chinese confinement diet aims to enhance immunity and help women regain strength. Malay mothers in confinement should not eat spicy food but soft foods especially soups. Indian confinement practices make use of specific foods as medicinal aids; toasted garlic to increase lactation, for example.

Chapter Seven uses visual sources, specifically food-related advertising, to explore how Singaporeans were encouraged to consume appropriate foods to develop the nation. Illustrations and texts reinforce the argument that foreign foods held an iconic significance in a port city where most food is imported. Shopping has become way of life in Singapore, for locals and visitors. Foreign brands enhance social status and provide reassurance for consumers. The author pays particular attention to suppliers of alcohol brands such as Gordon's gin, and other products such as Nescafe coffee, Ryvita biscuits, Magnolia ice cream, Marmite and Lingham's chilli sauce, exported for the exotic food market at Harrods in London. Advertising for brands and importers helps compensate for the absence of local products and the obvious foreignness of foods in Singapore. Imported foreign luxury foods do not substitute for local foods, but compete side by side in a non-segregated market.

Chapter Eight explores the use of social media, airlines, museums and culinary tourism as means to foster national identity, as Singapore offers itself to locals and tourists as a food destination. Long a shopping destination, Singapore has had many opportunities to display itself to outsiders. The markers of dress, food and colours are used to distinguish the four government-fixed racial categories—Chinese, Malay, Indian or

Other—for local and tourist consumption. Medical and educational tourism are relatively new developments. Singapore, with its English-language public sphere markets itself to tourists as the "knowable" westernised, globalised Asia. For the visitor, the food is accessible, domesticated and safe. But locals as well as tourists must address the fear of fake and contaminated food from China while still celebrating Chinese food. The government has purchased a food zone in mainland China to provide extra food security for Singapore and bring Chinese food imports up to Singapore's food safety standards.

Eating Her Curries and Kway is an excellent contribution to modern Asian culinary history. The writing is clear and vivid: bags of basmati rice coming through the baggage carousels at Singapore's Changi airport, imperial fantasies of Singapore Slings and gin and tonics at the Raffles Hotel and spotted dicks. The reviewer share the author's dislike of fish and seafood (mentioned on the opening page), and have spent countless conversations dealing with academic colleagues who ask how the reviewer can work in Southeast Asia and not like fish. Personal preferences are easily accepted in the region, and easily accommodated in the Southeast Asian meal format.

The book cries for broader comparisons within Southeast Asia, a region of the world where food and eating offer transformations of the Singaporean story. In the broader region, both systems of representation and structures of social relatedness are established through food sharing and non-sharing. Food is a site of meaning-making not only in Singapore, but throughout the region, where the meaning of individual food items such as rice have complex and interconnected histories. These shared Southeast Asian culinary patterns explain taste preferences that might well encourage Philippine nannies in Singapore to enjoy Malay dishes.

In Thailand where the reviewer carried out most of my ethnographic research, the script and tonal language and its status as the only Southeast Asian country never to be colonised, make it part of the "less knowable" Asia. Thai culinary tourism may be considered less tame, more exotic but somewhat more risky than culinary tourism in "knowable" Singapore. In Thailand, local and tourist foods are quite distinct; locals wouldn't eat tourist food, but tourists do have easy access to safe, unaltered local street food. Chinese culinary traditions have shaped some signature Thai dishes, and assimilated Sino-Thai traditions sit alongside distinct regional Thai traditions. And, as in Singapore, all are constantly changing.

Food studies as a flourishing discipline in its own right has been dominated by historians and anthropologists. This book is a reminder of the power of inter-disciplinarity in food studies. The reviewer learned much

from the historian writer but longed for an ethnographic component to complement the text-based arguments. The reviewer wanted more specifics on food imports, where Singapore's food comes from, and what (and where) the different ethnic and racial groups eat. The reviewer does not think that the book's argument that food is an acceptable form of excess, and substitutes for sex is an effective or sufficient explanation. The reviewer would need more ethnographic evidence around that argument. Perhaps that reflects the reviewer's experience in Thailand where both food and sex flourish to excess, and unlike Singapore, have been notoriously difficult to regulate.

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