

A good meal is hard to find

Foodie nation

by Martin B. Copenhaver

LATE IN HER LIFE, my mother confessed that she never enjoyed cooking very much. “But,” she said, “I did take satisfaction in serving simple and healthy meals to my family.”

Well, there is no such thing as a simple meal anymore. We have become a nation of foodies. Eating out is a national pastime. Culinary schools proliferate. Cookbooks take up more and more shelf space in bookstores and homes. And food is not just for eating anymore. A TV network devoted to food allows you to spend all 24 hours watching people prepare or consume food. The programming has been labeled “gastroporn.”

Food has become complicated in other ways as well. How we produce and deliver food has become a serious environmental issue. Films like *Food, Inc.* and books like *Fast Food Nation* report that much of the global supply of food resources are now controlled by a handful of enormous agribusiness companies. The resulting change in the way we eat threatens both our personal health and the health of the planet. It is estimated that almost 1 billion people suffer from hunger, while in

Can we be too mindful about what we eat?

the United States a third of the population is obese and the weight-loss industry makes \$40 billion a year. Crops are often harvested by exploited farmworkers. The meat we eat often comes from abused animals. Whole countries can be destabilized by our demand for foods like coffee or bananas. These are all symptoms of what Michael Pollan has called “our national eating disorder.”

So no meal is simple these days.

E. B. White once confessed, “I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.” It also makes it hard to plan a meal. These five books attempt to navigate the complexities of food.

In her earnest little volume *Eating and Drinking*, Elizabeth T. Groppe takes us through a day of trying to find something good to eat. She begins her day with a cup of coffee, even though she confides that she has “never been much of a coffee drinker.” We soon learn why. The coffee in ques-

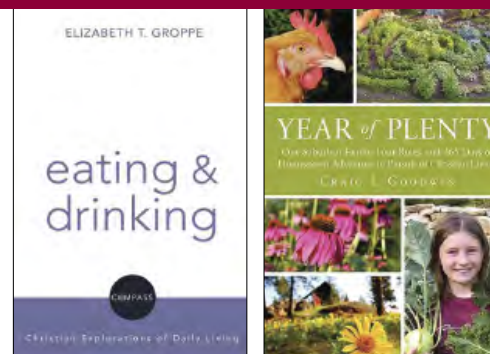
tion is picked by Guatemalan farmworkers who are paid just a few dollars a day, and they are regularly exposed to dangerous pesticides.

Then Groppe serves her young son a bowl of cereal that includes tiny marshmallows in a variety of colors. The concoction turns her son’s mouth a shade of blue that is not found in nature. Reading the label, she discovers that the main ingredient of the cereal is oats, but the no. 2 ingredient is marshmallows and the no. 3 ingredient is sugar. So much for the most important meal of the day.

Groppe reaches for a banana for a midmorning snack, and it “gives every appearance of being a wholesome and healthy snack.” But then she learns that the banana has been cultivated in Central America by large corporations that have ravaged the environment and “relied on the U.S. military to ensure supportive local governments and quell movements for justice.”

By the time Groppe gets to lunch—at a fast-food restaurant, no less—I felt like I was watching a horror movie with the hero about to open a door behind which a monster lurks. As

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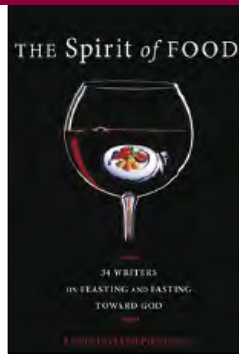
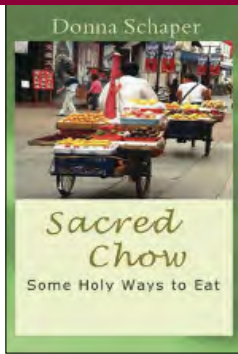
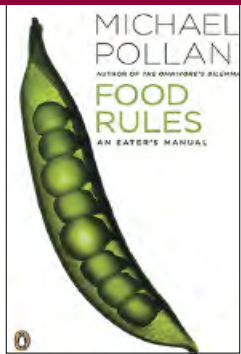
Eating and Drinking
By Elizabeth T. Groppe
Fortress, 136 pp., \$15.00 paperback

Year of Plenty
By Craig L. Goodwin
Sparkhouse, 224 pp., \$12.95 paperback

Food Rules: An Eater's Manual
By Michael Pollan
Penguin, 112 pp., \$11.00 paperback

Sacred Chow: Some Holy Ways to Eat
By Donna Schaper
Hansen-McMenamy, 114 pp., \$12.99 paperback

The Spirit of Food: 34 Writers on Feasting and Fasting toward God
Edited by Leslie Leyland Fields
Wipf and Stock, 286 pp., \$30.00 paperback



she heads into the restaurant, I wanted to yell: “Stop! Whatever you do, do not go into that restaurant.” But she goes in and has a meal that is monstrous on any number of levels.

And so it goes through the day. Everything she eats or drinks violates one ethical standard or another, and there is no indication that she enjoys a single bite or sip. What her book demonstrates is just how difficult it is to get a good meal these days—at least, a good meal in the fullest sense.

Craig L. Goodwin and his family attempted to live and eat responsibly by following four rules for a year: they would only eat food or buy items that were local, used, homegrown or homemade. Goodwin, a Presbyterian minister, knows that there have been a raft of *A Year of . . .* books lately (I am still waiting for *A Year of Reading Only ‘A Year of . . .’ Books*). He explains that he did not set out to write a book. Rather, after being disheartened by a prepackaged and over-stuffed Christmas celebration, he and his wife were looking for an alternative approach. Only later did he decide to write about their experiences, first in a blog and then in the charming book *Year of Plenty*.

Comparisons to Barbara Kingsolver’s *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* are inevitable. In that book, Kingsolver narrates her experiment with eating only homegrown and local food for a year. But that is where the similarity ends. Goodwin’s account offers the added benefit of insightful theological reflection on his family’s efforts and experiences. And the tone of the two books is different. Goodwin does not scold or lecture the reader, as Kingsolver often does. To be sure, he includes plenty of doleful statistics and exhibits some of the earnestness of a convert, but his writing is marked by a gentle and self-deprecating humor.

There are times when Goodwin struggles to follow his own rules, such as in his bungled attempt to make a homemade piñata for a child’s birthday party. And he admits to breaking one of the rules at times, such as when he could not resist

the temptation to buy a 50-pound bag of sugar: “I grabbed/hugged the pillowy bag of baker’s special, went through the checkout line and slunk back to the car, looking left and right like I’d just pulled off a drug deal.”

The Goodwins also allowed themselves one grand exception to the rules: they could buy anything from Thailand. They even threw in a trip to Thailand at the end of their year. This quirky feature was attributable to the fact that Goodwin’s wife, Nancy, had lived in Thailand for two years. Besides, the family did not want to abandon the wider world. Well . . . perhaps.

I just wanted them to enjoy their Thai food and even their trip to Thailand without having to explain it to the reader or justify it to themselves. I like Goodwin’s more nuanced reflection later in the book: “We discovered that a key to having rules to live by is not just sorting out how to enforce them, but also discerning when it’s okay to break them. Following rules is always an improvisational act, a living compromise where the constraints of human life crash up against hopes and ideals.”

Rules related to food are big these days. Michael Pollan’s latest book, *Food Rules: An Eater’s Manual*, spells out 64 rules for healthy, socially responsible eating. Happily, the last rule is “Break the rules every once in a while.”

To be sure, there are rules about food in scripture. A large portion of Leviticus consists of such rules. But as Donna

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TOWARD THE FUTURE CHURCH: CULTURAL MOVEMENTS AND INDIVIDUAL STORIES OF FAITH



Schaper points out in her book *Sacred Chow: Some Holy Ways to Eat*, when it came to food, Jesus was more of a breaker than a follower of rules. She writes, “I am constantly touched by Jesus’ problems with food. People did not like the way he ate.” Some did not like the fact that his disciples picked grain and ate it on the Sabbath, while others questioned why his disciples did not fast. Still others did not approve of the company he kept at table. Then he was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard because he obviously enjoyed food and drink. Apparently, Jesus broke food rules on a rather regular basis.

Schaper’s book is different from some books that advocate what she calls “holy and just eating” because she so obviously delights in food. Reflected in her writing is the conviction that the aesthetic and the ethical aspects of eating do not pull in opposite directions. Rather, they are more like dimensions of the same experience.

She describes stopping at a fast-food pizza restaurant. Schaper is a devotee of the Slow Food movement, but she was willing to put aside her convictions in deference to her hunger. The woman behind the counter assured her that she would make Schaper a fresh pizza and have it ready in one and a half minutes.

The pizza, when it arrived, was an affront to both her aesthetic and her ethical sensibilities (and notice how closely they are related):

Its sin was that it was made of something that long ago was grain—the white flour—and something long ago—the tomato—that was fruit. The cheese was no longer cheese and if the pepperoni ever was food, I’d be surprised. As I wolfed down my warm glob of chemicals, I thought about the sources of my food. In Florida the tomato pickers get 13 cents a bushel. Nobody could possibly pay the migrant workers any more than that because otherwise I’d never get that round, warm, 800 calorie, nutritionally worthless globule for just \$6.99.

A wide range of approaches to food are represented in *The Spirit of Food*. It contains essays by 34 writers, about a third of which have been published elsewhere. Two of the authors seem to preside at this feast, and they sit at different ends of the table. Their influence overflows the pages of their own essays.

One of the authors is Robert Farrar Capon, whose 1967 book *The Supper of the Lamb* is rightly described as an “enduring classic.” The book is hard to classify. Capon follows his own recipe: take a cookbook (the entire book takes us through the process of cooking a lamb stew), add some tart theological reflection and paeans to the glories of food, then stir passionately. The result is a delightful book that might be summarized in the words of the psalmist: “Taste and see that the Lord is good.” Capon insists that taste comes even before nutrition and that we have forgotten how to taste.

The chapter of Capon’s book included in *The Spirit of Food* is a reflection on chopping



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an onion. His gaze is fixed on that humble vegetable with as much passion as the lover in Song of Songs looks upon his beloved.

Capon calls the reader to attention. He insists that we taste and see anew. After slicing the onion, he writes: "Then look. The myth of sphericity is finally dead. The onion, as now displayed, is plainly all vectors, risers, and thrusts. *Tongues of fire*. But the Pentecost they mark is that of nature, not grace: the Spirit's first broodings on the face of the waters." An onion could not ask for a more elegant tribute. But wait. Capon is not done. He goes on like that for pages before he draws his gaze away from onion.

Many of the essays in *The Spirit of Food* join Capon in extolling the glories of food. One particularly delightful chapter, "In Praise of Hollandaise," is written by acclaimed chef Fred Raynaud, whose theological meditation on making that famously finicky sauce is very much in the style of Capon. Raynaud lingers over the wonders of Hollandaise, gives some instructions on how to pull it off, then uses the emulsification process as a metaphor for both incarnation and resurrection. Metaphors like that are tricky, mixed metaphors even more so, but in this case it works. I am not quite sure how Raynaud pulls it off, but he does (then again, I never knew how to pull off a good Hollandaise, either).

Farmer and writer Wendell Berry is the other author whose influence is reflected in many of these essays. Capon calls our attention to what is on the table. Berry wants to make sure that we look beyond the table. He affirms that "eating is an agricultural act." Although his essay is titled "The Pleasures of Eating," most of it is devoted to making the case that we must recognize the connection between what we eat and the rest of our lives. He insists that many of our current food choices and practices are disastrous both for the environment and for human community.

By now these are familiar arguments, in large part because Berry has articulated them so well and persistently. Many of the same convictions are reflected in other essays in this volume. Goodwin quotes Berry so often in *Year of Plenty* that Berry ought to get a share of the royalties. Reading Berry's essay, however, is to be remind-

ed why he has had such an influence. His writing is clear and impassioned:

The products of nature and agriculture have been made, by all appearances, the products of industry. Both eater and eaten are thus in exile from biological reality. And the result is a kind of solitude, unprecedented in human experience, in which the eater may think of eating as, first, a purely commercial transaction between him and a supplier and then as a purely appetitive transaction between him and his food.

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— PHYLLIS TICKLE

author of *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why*

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As Berry makes clear, food is the way the environmental movement visits our homes and pulls up a chair.

I try to imagine what it would be like to host a dinner party for all the authors of this book. I would be nervous, of course—worried that I would not be able to serve a meal that everyone would approve of. I imagine Capon, when responding to the invitation, inquiring about what is on the menu—ostensibly because he wants to bring the right wine pairing, but also, I suspect, because he might not approve of what I am serving. Berry would want to know where the food came from and if I know the people who produced it. OK, those two will have to sit at opposite ends of the table.

But that's just the beginning. Other authors bring other convictions and experiences to the table in ways that make it hard to picture them enjoying a meal together. One author, who once had a serious eating disorder, might remind me that food is still problematic for her. Another may come to the dinner but not eat anything because she is trying to reclaim the practice of fasting. Still another will want me to buy food obtained with food stamps as an exercise in solidarity with the poor. And, for dessert, one of the authors will bring pecan pie, made from her grandmother's recipe and insist that we all eat it, just as her grandmother used to do.

Is there a table big enough for such a dinner party? There are just so many ways to get food wrong these days and no

shortage of people willing to judge the food practices of others. Food fights are not just for school cafeterias anymore.

In a provocative article in the journal *Policy Review* titled "Is Food the New Sex?" Mary Eberstadt contends that a generation ago it was generally assumed that food was a matter of taste, whereas sex was governed by universal moral law. These days, she asserts, the assumptions are almost exactly the reverse. In many quarters there is more of a laissez-faire attitude toward other people's sex lives, or at least a reluctance to appear judgmental about them. But people are quick to judge the eating habits of others and often with an indignation that is reserved for those who violate moral imperatives. Eberstadt thinks that these changes in attitude are related:

In the end, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the rules being drawn around food receive some force from the fact that people are uncomfortable with how far the sexual revolution has gone—and not knowing what to do about it, they turn for increasing consolation to mining morality out of what they eat.

Whether or not Eberstadt is right, it seems undeniable that today the ways we eat are being scrutinized by others and that the scrutiny is often accompanied by a judgmentalism that is at best unattractive and is perhaps even a sin in itself.

Surely, at least some of our hyperfocus on food is a middle-class indulgence. The people who consistently ask if their food is local or organic, or if the chickens they eat were treated well while alive, are those who can afford to ask such questions. Farmers' markets don't generally accept food stamps.


In recent years I, like many people, have taken steps to eat more mindfully. I am more aware of the implications of my choices, and that has, in some instances, prompted me to make different choices. Nevertheless, the cumulative effect of reading all of these books on food and the spiritual life makes me wonder if we can be too mindful about what we eat.

After all, gluttony takes many forms. It is exhibited not just in the person who mindlessly wolfs down a lot of food. Gluttony, properly understood, is the sin of being fixated on food to an inordinate degree. So the dieter carefully meting out quarter cups of no-fat cottage cheese can be a glutton, and so can the person who drives across town to get organic lettuce.


Perhaps all of us are guilty of one sin or another when we sit down for a meal. That is one reason why I am particularly comforted by the reminder that Jesus welcomed sinners and that he ate with them, too.




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