Political Gastronomy: Food and Authority in the English Atlantic World.

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Scholarship on food history and diplomatic history rarely overlap. But, as Michael A. LaCombe argues in Political Gastronomy, food played a central role in early American politics and diplomacy. Food, he writes, was “the circulation of blood in a body politic” (9), shaping English-English and Indian-English encounters in the Atlantic world from 1580 to 1660. “When English elites struggled with each other for precedence or negotiated with Indian leaders,” LaCombe rightly notes, “they could not always rely on formal institutions, offices, and titles as props to their claims of legitimacy” (20). Everyday leadership and diplomacy instead centered on food exchanges that included meals, trade, and stealing. “Food was central,” the author demonstrates, “to any image of an effective leader, whether Native American or English” (23–24).

LaCombe explores the interplay of food and diplomacy through close readings of a half-dozen momentous meals, such as Opechancanough’s massacre of English colonists at breakfast in Virginia in 1622 and William Bradford’s wedding feast in 1623. LaCombe uses these meals to offer intriguing interpretations of familiar written and pictorial sources and to suggest the potential of combining food and diplomatic history. Seeing food as a mutually comprehensible middle ground for English and Indians offers an exciting new arena of inquiry. LaCombe’s work differs considerably from the studies that currently dominate food history, such as the history of a single food item or a focus on the culinary practices of middle-class women.1 However, it is often unclear what understanding or insight LaCombe intends the reader to glean from his lengthy examples, as

1 See for example E. Melanie Dupuis, Nature’s Perfect Food: How Milk Became America’s Drink (New York, 2002); Jessamyn Neuhaus, Manly Meals and Mom’s Home Cooking: Cookbooks and Gender in Modern America (Baltimore, 2003); Keith Staveley and Kathleen Fitzgerald, America’s Founding Food: The Story of New England Cooking (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2004); James E. McWilliams, A Revolution in Eating: How the Quest for Food Shaped America (New York, 2005); Roger Horowitz, Putting Meat on the American Table: Taste, Technology, Transformation (Baltimore, 2006); Laura Shapiro, Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century (Berkeley, Calif., 2008); Andrew Warnes, Savage Barbecue: Race, Culture, and the Invention of America’s First Food (Athens, Ga., 2008); Sarah Hand Meacham, Every Home a Distillery: Alcohol, Gender, and Technology in the Colonial Chesapeake (Baltimore, 2009).
he rarely discusses how his readings of food exchanges alter our understanding of either diplomatic history or the history of food.

LaCombe begins by examining food availability and distribution in order to recount the tensions among English colonists and the precarious nature of colonization. He reminds the reader that English colonists expected their leaders to arrange for the orderly production, storage, and distribution of food, expectations rooted in English grain laws. When England sent colonists to Jamestown, the settlers quickly deposed four of their leaders, in part, LaCombe claims, because they could not agree on the type of leader they needed, whether military, patriarchal, or aristocratic. In addition, none of the leaders was able to ensure the orderly distribution of food—or even to prevent starvation. Leaders were in a difficult spot, since they had neither the wheat that English bodies were thought to require nor the women necessary to cook and preserve English-style food. LaCombe contrasts the resulting dramatic infighting and starvation at Jamestown with similarly dramatic infighting in the face of plentiful food in Bermuda. When the *Sea Venture* shipwrecked on Bermuda, the abundance of food there almost derailed the authority of leader Lord De La Warre's deputy Sir Thomas Gates because he, like the Jamestown leaders, did not control food access.

LaCombe does not address the reasons why English colonists expressed no fear of eating unfamiliar foods in Bermuda as they did about eating unfamiliar foods such as Indian corn (*Zea mays*) in Virginia. Nor does he, after stating that “the stores [of food brought by De La Warre] would support his claim to lead by guaranteeing the survival of those who followed him” (47), explain what these stores were, or how De La Warre distributed them. Still, LaCombe presents a convincing case that the regular and orderly distribution of food was critical to maintaining a position of leadership in the early English Atlantic.

The potential of LaCombe’s interpretation is suggested in his ruminations on a pair of meals at Plymouth Plantation. These meals reveal what he calls an evolving friendship between English and Indians. He compares the so-called 1621 “first Thanksgiving” (87) at Plymouth to Governor Bradford’s 1623 marriage feast. In 1621, the Wampanoags were not invited to the ceremonial meal for which the Plymouth settlers had prepared waterfowl, a quarry that LaCombe explains was relatively easy to hunt at that time of year (87). The Wampanoags instead invited themselves and used the moment to demonstrate their strength. Massasoit and ninety or so of his men arrived, armed and unannounced, making a force “almost double the population of Plymouth including the elderly, infirm, women, and children” (88). Plymouth’s leaders responded with a demonstration of their own militia might. The Wampanoags then bested the English settlers “by departing briefly and returning with ‘five Deere,’ which he [Massasoit] ‘brought to the Plantation and bestowed on our Governour, and upon the
Captaine, and others” (88). LaCombe concludes that the act of returning with venison was a sign of “friendship” (89).

But this “friendship” (it is unclear what LaCombe means by this word, since its definition evolved continuously during the early modern era) had a barb. The Wampanoags, after showing their superior prowess in hunting, had not given the five deer to Governor Bradford. Instead, they had distributed the deer among five leading men in Plymouth. LaCombe states the distribution indicated that Massasoit “regarded them as men of status commensurate with his own” (89). This observation raises the obvious question of how this distribution, which LaCombe does not consider might have been a deliberate effort to sow division among colonists, equaled “friendship.”

Governor Bradford’s invitation to Massasoit to attend his wedding feast two years later, LaCombe argues, reveals the “slow evolution of the relationship between Massasoit and Bradford” (162). Again both sides displayed their military might. This time, however, Massasoit brought for the governor alone “three or four bucks and a turkey” (163). LaCombe does not explain how he thinks the relationship had changed, however, leaving the reader wondering what to conclude.

LaCombe returns to these meals in his final chapter, comparing them to Opechancanough’s attack on the Virginia Company’s scattered settlements in 1622. On the morning of March 22 of that year, Opechancanough and his men arrived with “Deere, Turkies, Fish, Furres, and other provisions, to sell, and trucke with us” (164). Once seated for breakfast, English sources claim, the Indians pulled out weapons and killed hundreds of colonists. LaCombe sees the three meals as related because in each case English colonists had to offer hospitality. Both sides used “the symbolic language of meals to convey the meanings they wanted, and as they learned about each other, both sides used this knowledge not only to avoid offense but to assert superiority” (135). Surely more could be said here; nevertheless, the variety of possible outcomes does support LaCombe’s primary conclusion that meals could be “fraught with tension” (135).

One of LaCombe’s most interesting points is his interpretation of the borrowing and stealing of food. His close reading reveals that in letters sent back to England colonists often hid from their readers the degree to which they depended on Native Americans for food. “Unrequited gifts”—that is, stealing—“from Indian leaders could be described as tribute” (90). “English accounts studiously avoided using the term ‘theft’ in reference to their own people” (91). When English leaders gave Indians gifts, they “were always described as the liberal giving of a magnanimous ruler or patron” (91). Yet “when Indians stole items from the English, these incidents were always regarded as an intolerable affront, a plain and direct declaration of hostility often attributed to Indian leaders” (91). Some scholars have argued that Native Americans did not have a conception of theft, understanding
all property as communal. LaCombe counters that the items taken from the English were not later discovered lying around unattended: they ended up as the property of Indian leaders. Thus it is more likely that Natives “were acting to enforce their own norms of exchange through stealing” (98). The English, too, were habitual thieves, as LaCombe points out, and they “could not forbear stealing food” (100). Once eaten, food cannot be returned, and English writers such as Bradford and Edward Winslow referred to the English as having helped themselves to “abandoned” buried corn, a raid for which they would later make “large satisfaction” (101).

LaCombe has innovatively combined a Saussurian approach with food and diplomatic history and applied this analysis to English-Indian interactions in the English Atlantic world, mostly during the early seventeenth century. The exclusive focus on food as signal limits the study’s arguments and conclusions considerably, but it also indicates the method’s possibilities. LaCombe’s readings of momentous food exchanges offer new interpretations of familiar sources and a way to help students begin to examine these sources.