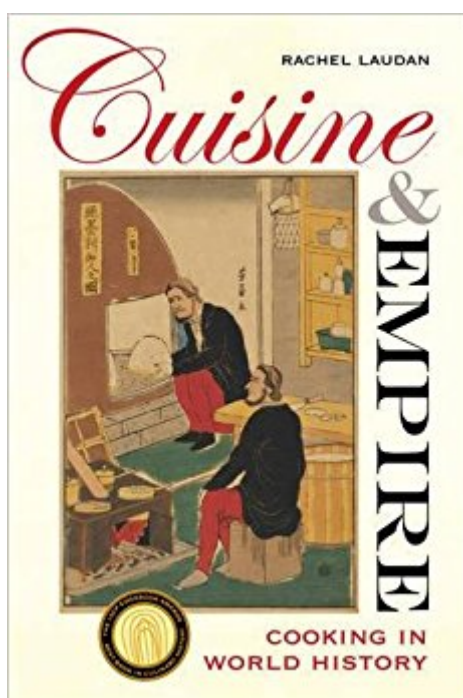


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# Cuisine And Empire: Cooking In World History (California Studies In Food And Culture)



## Synopsis

Rachel Laudan tells the remarkable story of the rise and fall of the world's great cuisines; from the mastery of grain cooking some twenty thousand years ago, to the present; in this superbly researched book. Probing beneath the apparent confusion of dozens of cuisines to reveal the underlying simplicity of the culinary family tree, she shows how periodic seismic shifts in culinary philosophy—beliefs about health, the economy, politics, society and the gods—prompted the construction of new cuisines, a handful of which, chosen as the cuisines of empires, came to dominate the globe. *Cuisine and Empire* shows how merchants, missionaries, and the military took cuisines over mountains, oceans, deserts, and across political frontiers. Laudan's innovative narrative treats cuisine, like language, clothing, or architecture, as something constructed by humans. By emphasizing how cooking turns farm products into food and by taking the globe rather than the nation as the stage, she challenges the agrarian, romantic, and nationalistic myths that underlie the contemporary food movement.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A dynamic and exciting book written with the kind of crispness, concision, and eloquence that will make you squirm with delight. (The World of Fine Wine 2014)"Laudan knows more about the world history of cooking than any other scholar alive . . . organized by a theoretical framework that structures her argument. " (Melanie DuPuis, Journal of Interdisciplinary History, 2014)."Wonderful . .

. There is nothing argumentative or prescriptive about her book . . . but in our current American historical moment it seems breathtakingly transgressive . . . What I appreciate about Laudan is her perspective." (Lydia Kiesling in *The Millions*, 01-28-2014). "During my forty year culinary career, there have been a select number of books that became touchstones, volumes that seemed to arrive just when inspiration was needed or direction was appropriate, books that somehow enhanced my sense of having found my calling. The newest addition to the list is a work of culinary history by Rachel Laudan." (Virginia B. Wood *The Austin Chronicle*, on the range 2013-10-17) "It seems like every time you hear someone mention processed food, it's accompanied with the words 'bad' or 'unhealthy,' plus a shaking finger. Unless you're author Rachel Laudan." (Los Angeles Times Daily Dish 2013-10-21) "Magnificent . . . Some of Laudan's 'diffusion maps' of particular styles of cuisine are miniature masterpieces of cultural history." (TLS 2013-12-20) "Epic in range. . . Its solidity and substance make a change from the day-to-day scatter of information delivered and consumed in tweets and sound bites." (The Daily Spud 2014-01-19) "A fascinating account of the rise and fall of cuisines. . . . Touching on all parts of the globe, Rachel explores human development through the vastly understated tool of food." (Blue Lifestyle Minute 2014-02-06) "A new standard for global culinary history." (Repast 2014-06-01)

&#147;A triumph, pointing the way to a wholly new kind of historiography that can hold its own with more familiar work on political, economic, social, and intellectual history.&#147; &#151;G. W. Bowersock, *New York Review of Books* &#147;Magnificent. . . . Some of Laudan's diffusion maps of particular styles of cuisine are miniature masterpieces of cultural history.&#147; &#151;Peter Thonemann, *Times Literary Supplement* "Rachel Laudan combines an impressive grasp of global history with a deep appreciation of the world's cuisines in all their glorious diversity. Readers who love food will find *Cuisine and Empire* both informative and entertaining." &#151;Daniel Headrick, author of *Power over Peoples: Technology, Environments, and Western Imperialism, 1400 to the Present* "Few writers could tackle the sweeping subject matter of *Cuisine and Empire* with such grace and authority as Rachel Laudan. She rises to this challenge with fresh insights and a global perspective on our attitudes to food. This book is not to be missed by food historians and lovers of good eating." &#151;Anne Willan, author of *The Cookbook Library: Four Centuries of the Cooks, Writers, and Recipes That Made the Modern Cookbook* &#147;Rachel Laudan offers a remarkable and always fascinating account of the rise and fall of cuisines, giving equal time to every part of the globe and situating the modern period within the much longer history of how people have gone about preparing food. The focus on cooking and

cuisine demonstrates the durability of tastes, but also how such tastes are spread and influenced by political and cultural expansion. Cuisine and Empire is a riveting and unique combination of culinary ideas and exposition on the materiality of eating. —Paul Freedman, editor of Food: The History of Taste —In this groundbreaking book, Rachel Laudan takes a distinctive approach to the development and expression of food cultures throughout human history. She describes successive models of foodways that illuminate different periods and places, underpinned by persuasive historical analysis. Both general readers and professional historians will feel challenged by her arguments to integrate food and its culture into their thinking about human history, not just as an afterthought but as an essential tool of understanding and explanation. —Naomi Duguid, author of Burma: Rivers of Flavor

The world has long needed a comprehensive, accurate, up-to-date history of cuisine. This is the book--but it is much more. It traces the sweep of cuisine through history: diffusion, trade, religious influences, migrations of peoples, and, of course, empires. Foodways have a history, and it involves world contacts. Globalism is not new; wheat spread over the Old World by 2000 BCE, and maize did the same (a bit later) in the New. Spices were traded from what is now Indonesia to ancient China and to the Roman Empire. Dr. Laudan traces influences over thousands of miles. One conclusion I take away from this is that it's silly to talk about "hybrid" cuisines--cuisines have been meeting and merging for thousands of years, and "fusion cuisine" is a term that could be applied to all of them. This book is also very well written--Dr. Laudan is a real stylist. Everyone interested in a thorough, deep history of food needs to read this work!

Rachel Laudan has given us an important and ground-breaking book. There is profit in it for the general reader who is just curious about the main topic, cuisine; but also for more specialized readers of social history, philosophical anthropology, the history of ideas, and the sociology of religion. The farmer does not give us food. —“A sheaf of wheat is no more food,” she asserts, —“than a boll of cotton is a garment.” It is a major theme of the book that farming may give us raw materials, but techniques (and importantly, ideas -- “culinary philosophy,” as she has it) of cooking are what give us food. It is, thus, futile to go on about how “natural” this or that foodstuff may be; we no more tear meat from bone with our teeth than we use them to grind the grass seeds that became our corn (maize, or wheat, or whatnot). Human labor, and ingenuity, stand between Nature and dinner. (This is even

true of *Raw Foods* (raw foods.) Laudan suggests that, by definition, all food is processed food -- from developing the techniques of settled agriculture to the promotion (or prohibition) of certain foods according to ideas (nicely summarized in tables 1.1-1.5) about such things as the four humors, the four or five elements, maintaining harmony in the universe, and sacralty -- and, more recently, as the songwriter said, while *We Are Eating Foods for Health*. (Modern theories of health and diet turn out to be just the latest in a whole series of fashions which change with the checkered changes of ideas in science and cosmology, since Babylon as it were.) Food may be "good to think," but in any case it is not just material fuel, it is a thing shaped by ideas and their changes. One particularly interesting thesis is that there was a broad movement, across different civilizations, from eating meats in religions of sacrifice, to different sorts of diets under religions of individual salvation. So one will read about Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, and Catholic cuisines. It would be mistaken to think such changes are merely the direct product of sect or dogma; for the religious cuisines followed differential patterns already set within their respective empires (hence, the title). Thus there are also Roman, Achaemenid, Mauryan, and Han cuisines. Empires need armies; armies, notoriously, march on their stomachs; and so empire as well as urbanization will drive innovation in foods, especially those that can be produced in bulk and transported over long-haul. One of the chief general merits of *Cuisine & Empire* is that it provides welcome relief from the usual sort of decline from Eden narrative -- often in support of the new new diet fad du mois: the Paleo, etc. -- about the evolution of foodways, the sort which leaps easily from an undifferentiated primordial past to the industrial present. (There is a similar problem with much sociobiological speculation about the evolution of sex.) The book starts, not with some presumed human psychology, but rather with historical differentiation of foodstuffs then goes on to trace convergences, driven by factors like urbanization & military growth which involve empires; though with due attention to continued differentiation in the long process of globalization (major empires converged upon wheat, but did so in different ways; what *Chinese food* is depends at least as much on what the locals' foodstuffs and preferences are, as what the immigrant Chinese restaurateurs may bring to the table in Lima or Manhattan or London). If our foodways have not declined from Eden, they have not exactly ascended to paradise either, though Laudan thinks that overall we have made reasonable improvement. She is equally critical when it comes to Romantic agrarian nostalgia for an imagined pre-industrial past, and to the thesis that all is converging upon a bland uniform McDonaldization. The scope of the narrative (from the origins of settled agriculture -- particularly grain cultivation -- to the present, and across a range of civilizations) as well as its

attention to the secular consequences of major religious change, and the importance of empire army and city, put me in mind of Max Weber. Likewise, Laudan ventures some generalizations: for instance, about the decline of sacrifice; or in the observation that the vast gulf fixed in empires between high cuisine for the few but humble cuisine for the many now survives mainly in the developing world, while in the developed world, since the 19th c., practically everyone eats a "middling cuisine" of one sort or another. The book's emphasis on the decline of sacrificial religion puts me in mind of Robert Bellah's theses about religious evolution. Its critique of nostalgia for what were actually quite harsh conditions in the pre-industrial past is reminiscent of C P Snow. The book is well-organized, with clearly-written summaries at transition points. (Here it bests Weber.) Nonetheless it will repay close and slow reading. All this is not to say it is not a fun read, for it is. I learned lots of neat little tidbits of history: high table was a secularization of the altar as banqueting became a secularization of the mass; it was once believed in India that sweets and unripe fruit could poison children; the words for recipe & prescription had been identical; "flour" was "flower"; Jews bought Crisco as an alternative to lard, while Quakers flogged chocolate as an alternative to alcohol (followed by Milton Hershey, a Mennonite); some experts in 19th c. America agreed that fruits and vegetables would cause fever and even cholera, and that pickles should be prohibited as a gateway drug (leading children down the pathway to demon rum); chicken-fried steak is but the baser form of Wiener Schnitzel. My breakfast tamale this morning was actually a "maize dumpling" -- well, yes it is; can't regard tamales the same way again.

A more comprehensive Gastronomic history of communities on all five continents - rather than just northern hemisphere/America centered accounts. Laudan also addresses a range of 'cultural cuisines' that underline the emergence of different concepts of 'good food'. Her perspective of religious communities makes a change from biological/nutrition centred 'developments', but still emphasizes economic advantages of certain foods, particularly grains. The thesis, about cooking over time, does not begin early enough, i.e. when humans first chose fire, for the necessity of 'cooking' as the author's starting point. When we can be more inclusive of the dollar driven choices that households must make every day to consider other influences on choice, we will have a broader history of TASTES. Fischler's *L'Homnivore* (2001) sets us on a path for considering the cultural basis of choices.

This is a great book. It uses a synoptic view of cooking to shine a searchlight on the development of human culture by an analysis of the development of cooking; what we cook and how we cook. The author states, in the introduction, that the book "takes seriously the fact that we are the animals that cook." "How [the book] asks, has cooking evolved over the past five thousand years?" If we examine this history we can gain insight into the evolution of human societies. That is the task that the author has set for herself and for the still fairly recent discipline of looking at and looking into the history of food. Laudan writes that "history is more than a pile of facts. It also seeks patterns in those facts." Those patterns lead to understanding the subject matter being examined. The development of human societies is something worthy of study and understanding. This is a wonderful introduction to this way of thinking.

If you have ever wanted to understand why the world eats the diverse foods that it does or why some foods seem to have appeal in diverse locales, this is your book. Rachel Laudan manages to write with astonishing depth and scope as she shows how cuisine has travelled with the great religions as they spread from continent to continent. Her style has a windswept quality that entices the reader to feel that they are traveling with the monks, merchants and explorers around the globe.

Extraordinary overview of foods and cooking through history supremely relevant for understanding the disparate philosophies of food and health still operating today. Entertaining and fast moving in order to show the interrelationships of economies and belief systems as they developed over the ages, it clearly eclipses Reay Tannahill's excellent Food in History. Her cross-disciplinary approach has so many facets that at times it becomes almost a logjam of ideas, but the constant returns to her large themes maintains a coherent narrative. Highly recommended.

I think I would not be amiss to call this book a masterpiece. This should be in everyone's library. Just terrific.

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