

## Plea for culinary modernism: Why we should love processed food

Modern, fast, processed food is a disaster. That, at least, is the message conveyed by newspapers and magazines, on television cooking programs, and in prizewinning cookbooks.

It is a mark of sophistication to bemoan the steel roller mill and supermarket bread while yearning for stone ground flour and brick ovens; to seek out heirloom apples and pumpkins while despising modern tomatoes and hybrid corn; to be hostile to agronomists who develop high-yielding modern crops and to home economists who invent new recipes for General Mills.

We hover between ridicule and shame when we remember how our mothers and grandmothers enthusiastically embraced canned and frozen foods. We nod in agreement when the waiter proclaims that the restaurant showcases the freshest local produce. We shun Wonder Bread and Coca-Cola. Above all, we loathe the great culminating symbol of Culinary Modernism, McDonald's — modern, fast, homogenous, and international.

Like so many of my generation, my culinary style was created by those who scorned industrialized food; Culinary Luddites, we may call them, after the English hand workers of the nineteenth century who abhorred the machines that were destroying their traditional way of life. I learned to cook from the books of Elizabeth David, who urged us to sweep our store cupboards “clean for ever of the cluttering debris of commercial sauce bottles and all synthetic flavorings.”

I progressed to the [Time-Life Good Cook](#) series and to *Simple French Cooking*, in which [Richard Olney](#) hoped against hope that “the reins of stubborn habit are strong enough to frustrate the famous industrial revolution for some time to come.” I turned to [Paula Wolfert](#) to learn more about Mediterranean cooking and was assured that I wouldn't “find a dishonest dish in this book . . . The food here is real food . . . the real food of real people.” Today I rush to the newsstand to pick up [Saveur](#) with its promise to teach me to “Savor a world of authentic cuisine.”

Culinary Luddism involves more than just taste. Since the days of the counterculture, it has also presented itself as a moral and political crusade. Now in Boston, the Oldways Preservation and Exchange Trust works to provide “a scientific basis for the preservation and revitalization of traditional diets.

Meanwhile [Slow Food](#), founded in 1989 to protest the opening of a McDonald's in Rome, is a self-described Greenpeace for Food; its [manifesto](#) begins, “We are enslaved by speed and have all succumbed to the same insidious virus: Fast Life, which disrupts our habits, pervades the privacy of our homes and forces us to eat Fast Foods . . . Slow Food is now the only truly progressive answer.” As one of its spokesmen [was reported](#) as saying in the *New York Times*, “Our real enemy is the obtuse consumer.”

At this point I begin to back off. I want to cry, “Enough!” But why? Why would I, who learned to cook from Culinary Luddites, who grew up in a family that, in Elizabeth David's words, produced their “own home-cured bacon, ham and sausages . . . churned their own butter, fed their chickens and geese, cherished

their fruit trees, skinned and cleaned their own hares” (well, to be honest, not the geese and sausages), not rejoice at the growth of Culinary Luddism? Why would I (or anyone else) want to be thought “an obtuse consumer”? Or admit to preferring unreal food for unreal people? Or to savoring inauthentic cuisine?

The answer is not far to seek: because I am an historian.

As an historian I cannot accept the account of the past implied by Culinary Luddism, a past sharply divided between good and bad, between the sunny rural days of yore and the gray industrial present. My enthusiasm for Luddite kitchen wisdom does not carry over to their history, any more than my response to a stirring political speech inclines me to accept the orator as scholar.

The Luddites’ fable of disaster, of a fall from grace, smacks more of wishful thinking than of digging through archives. It gains credence not from scholarship but from evocative dichotomies: fresh and natural versus processed and preserved; local versus global; slow versus fast: artisanal and traditional versus urban and industrial; healthful versus contaminated and fatty. History shows, I believe, that the Luddites have things back to front.

That food should be fresh and natural has become an article of faith. It comes as something of a shock to realize that this is a latter-day creed. For our ancestors, natural was something quite nasty. Natural often tasted bad.

Fresh meat was rank and tough; fresh milk warm and unmistakably a bodily excretion; fresh fruits (dates and grapes being rare exceptions outside the tropics) were inedibly sour, fresh vegetables bitter. Even today, natural can be a shock when we actually encounter it. When [Jacques Pepin](#) offered free-range chickens to friends, they found “the flesh tough and the flavor too strong,” prompting him to wonder whether they would really like things the way they naturally used to be. Natural was unreliable. Fresh fish began to stink. Fresh milk soured, eggs went rotten.

Everywhere seasons of plenty were followed by seasons of hunger when the days were short. The weather turned cold, or the rain did not fall. Hens stopped laying eggs, cows went dry, fruits and vegetables were not to be found, fish could not be caught in the stormy seas.

Natural was usually indigestible. Grains, which supplied from fifty to ninety percent of the calories in most societies have to be threshed, ground, and cooked to make them edible. Other plants, including the roots and fibers that were the life support of the societies that did not eat grains, are often downright poisonous. Without careful processing green potatoes, stinging taro, and cassava bitter with prussic acid are not just indigestible, but toxic.

Nor did our ancestors' physiological theories dispose them to the natural. Until about two hundred years ago, from China to Europe, and in Mesoamerica, too, everyone believed that the fires in the belly cooked foodstuffs and turned them into nutrients. That was what digestion was. Cooking foods in effect pre-digested them and made them easier to assimilate. Given a choice, no one would burden the stomach with raw, unprocessed foods.

So to make food tasty, safe, digestible and healthy, our forebears bred, ground, soaked, leached, curdled, fermented, and cooked naturally occurring plants and animals until they were literally beaten into submission.

To lower toxin levels, they cooked plants, treated them with clay (the Kaopectate effect), leached them with water, acid fruits and vinegars, and alkaline lye. They intensively bred maize to the point that it could not reproduce without human help. They created sweet oranges and juicy apples and non-bitter legumes, happily abandoning their more natural but less tasty ancestors.

They built granaries for their grain, dried their meat and their fruit, salted and smoked their fish, curdled and fermented their dairy products, and cheerfully used whatever additives and preservatives they could — sugar, salt, oil, vinegar, lye — to make edible foodstuffs.

In the twelfth century, the Chinese sage Wu Tzu-mu listed the six foodstuffs essential to life: rice, salt, vinegar, soy sauce, oil, and tea. Four had been unrecognizably transformed from their naturally occurring state.

Who could have imagined vinegar as rice that had been fermented to ale and then soured? Or soy sauce as cooked and fermented beans? Or oil as the extract of crushed cabbage seeds? Or bricks of tea as leaves that had been killed by heat, powdered, and compressed? Only salt and rice had any claim to fresh or natural, and even then the latter had been stored for months or years, threshed, and husked.

Processed and preserved foods kept well, were easier to digest, and were delicious: raised white bread instead of chewy wheat porridge; thick, nutritious, heady beer instead of prickly grains of barley; unctuous olive oil instead of a tiny, bitter fruit; soy milk, sauce, and tofu instead of dreary, flatulent soy beans; flexible, fragrant tortillas instead of dry, tough maize; not to mention red wine, blue cheese, sauerkraut, hundred-year-old eggs, Smithfield hams, smoked salmon, yogurt, sugar, chocolate, and fish sauce.

Eating fresh, natural food was regarded with suspicion verging on horror, something to which only the uncivilized, the poor, and the starving resorted. When the compiler of the Confucian classic, the Book of Rites (ca. 200 BC), distinguished the first humans — people who had no alternative to wild, uncooked foods — from civilized peoples who took “advantage of the benefits of fire . . . [who] toasted, grilled, boiled, and roasted,” he was only repeating a commonplace.

When the ancient Greeks took it as a sign of bad times if people were driven to eat greens and root vegetables, they too were rehearsing common wisdom. Happiness was not a verdant Garden of Eden abounding in fresh fruits, but a securely locked storehouse jammed with preserved, processed foods.

Local food was greeted with about as much enthusiasm as fresh and natural. Local foods were the lot of the poor who could neither escape the tyranny of local climate and biology nor the monotonous, often precarious, diet it afforded. Meanwhile, the rich, in search of a more varied diet, bought, stole, wheedled, robbed, taxed, and ran off with appealing plants and animals, foodstuffs, and culinary techniques from wherever they could find them.

By the fifth century BC, Celtic princes in the region of France now known as Burgundy were enjoying a glass or two of Greek wine, drunk from silver copies of Greek drinking vessels. The Greeks themselves looked to the Persians, acclimatizing their peaches and apricots and citrons and emulating their rich sauces, while the Romans in turn hired Greek cooks. From around the time of the birth of Christ, the wealthy in China, India, and the Roman Empire paid vast sums for spices brought from the distant and mysterious Spice Islands.

From the seventh century AD, Islamic caliphs and sultans transplanted sugar, rice, citrus, and a host of other Indian and Southeast Asian plants to Persia and the Mediterranean, transforming the diets of West Asia and the shores of the Mediterranean. In the thirteenth century, the Japanese had naturalized the tea plant of China and were importing sugar from Southeast Asia.

In the seventeenth century, the European rich drank sweetened coffee, tea, and cocoa in Chinese porcelain, imported or imitation, proffered by servants in Turkish or other foreign dress. To ensure their own supply, the French, Dutch, and English embarked on imperial ventures and moved millions of Africans and Asians around the globe. The Swedes, who had no empire, had a hard time getting these exotic foodstuffs, so the eighteenth-century botanist Linnaeus set afoot plans to naturalize the tea plant in Sweden.

We may laugh at the climatic hopelessness of his proposal. Yet it was no more ridiculous than other, more successful, proposals to naturalize Southeast Asian sugarcane throughout the tropics, apples in Australia, grapes in Chile, hereford cattle in Colorado and Argentina, and Caucasian wheat on the Canadian prairie. Without our aggressively global ancestors, we would all still be subject to the tyranny of the local.

As for slow food, it is easy to wax nostalgic about a time when families and friends met to relax over delicious food, and to forget that, far from being an invention of the late twentieth century, fast food has been a mainstay of every society.

Hunters tracking their prey, fishermen at sea, shepherds tending their flocks, soldiers on campaign, and farmers rushing to get in the harvest all needed food that could be eaten quickly and away from home. The Creeks roasted barley and ground it into a meal to eat straight or mixed with water, milk, or butter (as the Tibetans still do), while the Aztecs ground roasted maize and mixed it with water to make an instant beverage (as the Mexicans still do).

City dwellers, above all, relied on fast food. When fuel cost as much as the food itself, when huddled dwellings lacked cooking facilities, and when cooking fires might easily conflagrate entire neighborhoods, it made sense to purchase your bread or noodles, and a little meat or fish to liven them up.

Before the birth of Christ, Romans were picking up honey cakes and sausages in the Forum. In twelfth-century Hangchow, the Chinese downed noodles, stuffed buns, bowls of soup, and deep-fried confections. In Baghdad of the same period, the townspeople bought ready-cooked meats, salt fish, bread, and a broth of dried chick peas. In the sixteenth century, when the Spanish arrived in Mexico, Mexicans had been enjoying tacos from the market for generations. In the eighteenth century, the French purchased cocoa, apple turnovers, and wine in the boulevards of Paris, while the Japanese savored tea, noodles, and stewed fish.

Deep-fried foods, expensive and dangerous to prepare at home, have always had their place on the street: doughnuts in Europe, churros in Mexico, andagi in Okinawa, and sev in India. Bread, also expensive to bake at home, is one of the oldest convenience foods. For many people in West Asia and Europe, a loaf fresh from the baker was the only warm food of the day.

To these venerable traditions of fast food, Americans have simply added the electric deep fryer, the heavy iron griddle of the Low Countries, and the franchise. The McDonald's in Rome was, in fact, just one more in a long tradition of fast food joints reaching back to the days of the Caesars.

What about the idea that the best food was country food, handmade by artisans? That food came from the country goes without saying. The presumed corollary — that country people ate better than city dwellers — does not.

Few who worked the land were independent peasants baking their own bread, brewing their own wine or beer, and salting down their own pig. Most were burdened with heavy taxes and rents paid in kind (that is, food); or worse, they were indentured, serfs, or slaves.

Barely part of the cash economy, they subsisted on what was left over. "The city dwellers," [remarked](#) the great Roman doctor Galen in the second century AD, "collected and stored enough grain for all the coming year immediately after the harvest. They carried off all the wheat, the barley, the beans and the lentils and left what remained to the countryfolk."

What remained was pitiful. All too often, those who worked the land got by on thin gruels and gritty flatbreads north of the Alps. French peasants prayed that chestnuts would be sufficient to sustain them from the time when their grain ran out to the harvest still three months away. South of the Alps, Italian peasants suffered skin eruptions, went mad, and in the worst cases died of pellagra brought on by a diet of maize polenta and water.

The dishes we call ethnic and assume to be of peasant origin were invented for the urban, or at least urbane, aristocrats who collected the surplus. This is as true of the lasagne of northern Italy as it is of the chicken konna of Mughal Delhi, the mooshu pork of imperial China, the pilafs, stuffed vegetables, and baklava of the great Ottoman palace in Istanbul, or the mee krob of nineteenth-century Bangkok. Cities

have always enjoyed the best food and have invariably been the focal points of culinary innovation.

Nor are most “traditional foods” very old. For every prized dish that goes back two thousand years, a dozen have been invented in the last two hundred. The French baguette? A twentieth-century phenomenon, adopted nationwide only after World War II. English fish and chips? Dates from the late nineteenth century, when the working class took up the fried fish of Sephardic Jewish immigrants in East London. Fish and chips, though, will soon be a thing of the past.

It's a Balti and lager now, Balti being a kind of stir-fried curry dreamed up by Pakistanis living in Birmingham. Greek moussaka? Created in the early twentieth century in an attempt to Frenchify Greek food. The bubbling Russian samovar? Late eighteenth century. The Indonesian rijsttafel? Dutch colonial food. Indonesian padang food? Invented for the tourist market in the past fifty years.

Tequila? Promoted as the national drink of Mexico during the 1930s by the Mexican film industry. Indian tandoori chicken? The brainchild of Hindu Punjabis who survived by selling chicken cooked in a Muslim-style tandoor oven when they fled Pakistan for Delhi during the Partition of India. The soy sauce, steamed white rice, sushi, and tempura of Japan? Commonly eaten only after the middle of the nineteenth century.

The lomilomi salmon, salted salmon rubbed with chopped tomatoes and spring onions that is a fixture in every Hawaiian luau? Not a salmon is to be found within two thousand miles of the islands, and onions and tomatoes were unknown in Hawaii until the nineteenth century. These are indisputable facts of history, though if you point them out you will be met with stares of disbelief.

Not only were many “traditional” foods created after industrialization and urbanization, a lot of them were dependent on it. The Swedish smorgasbord came into its own at the beginning of the twentieth century when canned out-of-season fish, roe, and liver paste made it possible to set out a lavish table. Hungarian goulash was unknown before the nineteenth century, and not widely accepted until after the invention of a paprika-grinding mill in 1859.

When lands were conquered, peoples migrated, populations converted to different religions or accepted new dietary theories, and dishes — even whole cuisines — were forgotten and new ones invented. Where now is the cuisine of Renaissance Spain and Italy, or of the Indian Raj, or of Tsarist Russia, or of medieval Japan? Instead we have Nonya food in Singapore, Cape Malay food in South Africa, Creole food in the Mississippi Delta, and Local Food in Hawaii. How long does it take to create a cuisine? Not long: less than fifty years, judging by past experience.

Were old foods more healthful than ours? Inherent in this vague notion are several different claims, among them that foods were less dangerous, that diets were better balanced.

Yet while we fret about pesticides on apples, mercury in tuna, and mad cow disease, we should remember that ingesting food is, and always has been, inherently dangerous. Many plants contain both toxins and carcinogens, often at levels much higher than any pesticide residues. Grilling and frying add more.

Some historians argue that bread made from moldy, verminous flour, or adulterated with mash, leaves, or

bark to make it go further, or contaminated with hemp or poppy seeds to drown out sorrows, meant that for five hundred years Europe's poor staggered around in a drugged haze subject to hallucinations.

Certainly, many of our forebears were drunk much of the time, given that beer or wine were preferred to water, and with good reason. In the cities, polluted water supplies brought intestinal diseases in their wake. In France, for example, no piped water was available until the 1860s.

Bread was likely to be stretched with chalk, pepper adulterated with the sweepings of warehouse floors, and sausage stuffed with all the horrors famously exposed by Upton Sinclair in *The Jungle*. Even the most reputable cookbooks recommended using concentrated sulphuric acid to intensify the color of jams.

Milk, suspected of spreading scarlet fever, typhoid, and diphtheria as well as tuberculosis, was sensibly avoided well into the twentieth century when the United States and many parts of Europe introduced stringent regulations. My mother sifted weevils from the flour bin; my aunt reckoned that if the maggots could eat her home-cured ham and survive, so could the family.

As to dietary balance, once again we have to distinguish between rich and poor. The rich, whose bountiful tables and ample girths were visible evidence of their station in life, suffered many of the diseases of excess.

In the seventeenth century, the Mughal Emperor, [Jahangir](#), died of overindulgence in food, opium, and alcohol. In Georgian England, [George Cheyne](#), the leading doctor, had to be wedged in and out of his carriage by his servants when he soared to four hundred pounds, while a little later Erasmus Darwin, grandfather of Charles and another important physician, had a semicircle cut out of his dining table to accommodate his paunch.

In the nineteenth century, the fourteenth shogun of Japan died at age twenty-one, probably of beriberi induced by eating the white rice available only to the privileged. In the Islamic countries, India, and Europe, the well-to-do took sugar as a medicine; in India they used butter; and in much of the world people avoided fresh vegetables, all on medical advice.

Whether the peasants really starved, and if so how often, particularly outside of Europe, is the subject of ongoing research. What is clear is that the food supply was always precarious: if the weather was bad or war broke out, there might not be enough to go around. The end of winter or the dry season saw everyone suffering from the lack of fresh fruits and vegetables, scurvy occurring on land as well as at sea.

By our standards, the diet was scanty for people who were engaged in heavy physical toil. Estimates suggest that in France on the eve of the Revolution one in three adult men got by on no more than 1,800 calories a day, while a century later in Japan daily intake was perhaps 1,850 calories. Historians believe that in times of scarcity peasants essentially hibernated during the winter. It is not surprising, therefore, that in France the proudest of boasts was "there is always bread in the house," while the Japanese adage advised that "all that matters is a full stomach."

By the standard measures of health and nutrition — life expectancy and height — our ancestors were far worse off than we are. Much of the blame was due to the diet, exacerbated by living conditions and

infections which affect the body's ability to use the food that is ingested. No amount of nostalgia for the pastoral foods of the distant past can wish away the fact that our ancestors lived mean, short lives, constantly afflicted with diseases, many of which can be directly attributed to what they did and did not eat.

Historical myths, though, can mislead as much by what they don't say as by what they do. Culinary Luddites typically gloss over the moral problems intrinsic to the labor of producing and preparing food. In 1800, 95 percent of the Russian population and 80 percent of the French lived in the country; in other words, they spent their days getting food on the table for themselves and other people.

A century later, 88 percent of Russians, 85 percent of Greeks, and over 50 percent of the French were still on the land. Traditional societies were aristocratic, made up of the many who toiled to produce, process, preserve, and prepare food, and the few who, supported by the limited surplus, could do other things.

In the great kitchens of the few — royalty, aristocracy, and rich merchants — cooks created elaborate cuisines. The cuisines drove home the power of the mighty few with a symbol that everyone understood: ostentatious shows of more food than the powerful could possibly consume. Feasts were public occasions for the display of power, not private occasions for celebration, for enjoying food for food's sake. The poor were invited to watch, groveling as the rich gorged themselves.

[Louis XIV](#) was exploiting a tradition going back to the Roman Empire when he encouraged spectators at his feasts. Sometimes, to hammer home the point while amusing the court, the spectators were let loose on the leftovers. "The destruction of so handsome an arrangement served to give another agreeable entertainment to the court," observed a commentator, "by the alacrity and disorder of those who demolished these castles of marzipan, and these mountains of preserved fruit."

Meanwhile, most men were born to a life of labor in the fields, most women to a life of grinding, chopping, and cooking. "Servitude," said my mother as she prepared home-cooked breakfast, dinner, and tea for eight to 10 people 365 days a year.

She was right. Churning butter and skinning and cleaning hares, without the option of picking up the phone for a pizza if something goes wrong, is unremitting, unforgiving toil. Perhaps, though, my mother did not realize how much worse her lot might have been.

She could at least buy our bread from the bakery. In Mexico, at the same time, women without servants could expect to spend five hours a day — one third of their waking hours — kneeling at the grindstone preparing the dough for the family's tortillas. Not until the 1950s did the invention of the tortilla machine release them from the drudgery.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it looked as if the distinction between gorgers and grovelers would worsen. Between 1557 and 1825 world population had doubled from 500 million to a billion, and it was to double again by 1925.



[Malthus](#) sounded his dire predictions. The poor, driven by necessity or government mandate, resorted to basic foods that produced bountifully even if they were disliked: maize and sweet potatoes in China and Japan, maize in Italy, Spain and Romania, potatoes in northern Europe.

They eked out an existence on porridges or polentas of oats or maize, on coarse breads of rye or barley bulked out with chaff or even clay and ground bark, and on boiled potatoes; they saw meat only on rare occasions. The privation continued. In Europe, 1840 was a year of hunger, best remembered now as the time of the devastating potato famine of Ireland.

Meanwhile, the rich continued to indulge, feasting on white bread, meats, rich fatty sauces, sweet desserts, exotic hothouse-grown pineapples, wine, and tea, coffee, and chocolate drunk from fine china. In 1845, shortly after revolutions had rocked Europe, the British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli [described](#) “two nations, between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy . . . who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws . . . THE RICH AND THE POOR.”

In the nick of time, in the 1880s, the industrialization of food got under way long after the production of other common items of consumption such as textiles and clothing had been mechanized. Farmers brought new land into production, utilized reapers and later tractors and combines, spread more fertilizer, and by the 1930s began growing hybrid maize. Steamships and trains brought fresh and canned meats, fruits, vegetables, and milk to the growing towns. Instead of starving, the poor of the industrialized world survived and thrived.

In Britain the retail price of food in a typical workman's budget fell by a third between 1877 and 1887 (though he would still spend 71 percent of his income on food and drink). In 1898 in the United States a dollar bought 42 percent more milk, 51 percent more coffee, a third more beef, twice as much sugar, and twice as much flour as in 1872. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the British working class were drinking sugary tea from china teacups and eating white bread spread with jam and margarine, canned meats, canned pineapple, and an orange from the Christmas stocking.

To us, the cheap jam, the margarine, and the starchy diet look pathetic. Yet white bread did not cause the “weakness, indigestion, or nausea” that coarse whole wheat bread did when it supplied most of the calories (not a problem for us since we never consume it in such quantities). Besides, it was easier to detect stretchers such as sawdust in white bread. Margarine and jam made the bread more attractive and easier to swallow. Sugar tasted good, and hot tea in an unheated house in mid-winter provided good cheer.

For those for whom fruit had been available, if at all, only from June to October, canned pineapple and a Christmas orange were treats to be relished. For the diners, therefore, the meals were a dream come true, a first step away from a coarse, monotonous diet and the constant threat of hunger, even starvation.

Nor should we think it was only the British, not famed for their cuisine, who were delighted with industrialized foods. Everyone was, whether American, Asian, African, or European.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Italians embraced factory-made pasta and canned tomatoes. In the second half of the century, Japanese women welcomed factory-made bread because they could sleep in a little longer instead of having to get up to make rice. Similarly, Mexicans seized on bread as a good food to have on hand when there was no time to prepare tortillas.

Working women in India are happy to serve commercially made bread during the week, saving the time-consuming business of making chapatis for the weekend. As supermarkets appeared in Eastern Europe and Russia, housewives rejoiced at the choice and convenience of ready-made goods.

For all, Culinary Modernism had provided what was wanted: food that was processed, preservable, industrial, novel, and fast, the food of the elite at a price everyone could afford. Where modern food became available, populations grew taller, stronger, had fewer diseases, and lived longer. Men had choices other than hard agricultural labor, women other than kneeling at the metate five hours a day.

So the sunlit past of the Culinary Luddites never existed. So their ethos is based not on history but on a fairy tale. So what? Perhaps we now need this culinary philosophy. Certainly no one would deny that an industrialized food supply has its own problems, problems we hear about every day. Perhaps we should eat more fresh, natural, local, artisanal, slow food. Why not create a historical myth to further that end? The past is over and gone. Does it matter if the history is not quite right?

It matters quite a bit, I believe. If we do not understand that most people had no choice but to devote their lives to growing and cooking food, we are incapable of comprehending that the foods of Culinary Modernism — egalitarian, available more or less equally to all, without demanding the disproportionate amount of the resources of time or money that traditional foodstuffs did — allow unparalleled choices not just of diet but of what to do with our lives.

If we urge the Mexican to stay at her metate, the farmer to stay at his olive press, the housewife to stay at her stove instead of going to McDonald's, all so that we may eat handmade tortillas, traditionally pressed olive oil, and home-cooked meals, we are assuming the mantle of the aristocrats of old. We are reducing the options of others as we attempt to impose our elite culinary preferences on the rest of the population.

If we fail to understand how scant and monotonous most traditional diets were, we can misunderstand the "ethnic foods" we encounter in cookbooks, restaurants, or on our travels. We let our eyes glide over the occasional references to servants, to travel and education abroad in so-called ethnic cookbooks, references that otherwise would clue us in to the fact that the recipes are those of monied Italians, Indians, or Chinese with maids to do the donkey work of preparing elaborate dishes.

We may mistake the meals of today's European, Asian, or Mexican middle class (many of them benefiting from industrialization and contemporary tourism) for peasant food or for the daily fare of our ancestors. We can represent the peoples of the Mediterranean, Southeast Asia, India, or Mexico as pawns at the mercy of multinational corporations bent on selling trashy modern products — failing to appreciate that,

like us, they enjoy a choice of goods in the market, foreign restaurants to eat at, and new recipes to try.

A Mexican friend, suffering from one too many foreign visitors who chided her because she offered Italian, not Mexican food, complained, “Why can’t we eat spaghetti, too?” If we unthinkingly assume that good food maps neatly onto old or slow or homemade food (even though we’ve all had lousy traditional cooking), we miss the fact that lots of industrial foodstuffs are better. Certainly no one with a grindstone will ever produce chocolate as suave as that produced by conching in a machine for 72 hours. Nor is the housewife likely to turn out fine soy sauce or miso.

And let us not forget that the current popularity of Italian food owes much to the availability and long shelf life of two convenience foods that even purists love, high-quality factory pasta and canned tomatoes. Far from fleeing them, we should be clamoring for more high-quality industrial foods.

If we romanticize the past, we may miss the fact that it is the modern, global, industrial economy (not the local resources of the wintry country around New York, Boston, or Chicago) that allows us to savor traditional, peasant, fresh, and natural foods.

Virgin olive oil, Thai fish sauce, and udon noodles come to us thanks to international marketing. Fresh and natural loom so large because we can take for granted the preserved and processed staples — salt, flour, sugar, chocolate, oils, coffee, tea — produced by agribusiness and food corporations. Asparagus and strawberries in winter come to us on trucks trundling up from Mexico and planes flying in from Chile.

Visits to charming little restaurants and colorful markets in Morocco or Vietnam would be impossible without international tourism. The ethnic foods we seek out when we travel are being preserved, indeed often created, by a hotel and restaurant industry determined to cater to our dream of India or Indonesia, Turkey, Hawaii, or Mexico. Culinary Luddism, far from escaping the modern global food economy, is parasitic upon it.

Culinary Luddites are right, though, about two important things. We need to know how to prepare good food, and we need a culinary ethos. As far as good food goes, they’ve done us all a service by teaching us to how to use the bounty delivered to us (ironically) by the global economy.

Their culinary ethos, though, is another matter. Were we able to turn back the clock, as they urge, most of us would be toiling all day in the fields or the kitchen; many of us would be starving. Nostalgia is not what we need.

What we need is an ethos that comes to terms with contemporary, industrialized food, not one that dismisses it, an ethos that opens choices for everyone, not one that closes them for many so that a few may enjoy their labor, and an ethos that does not prejudge, but decides case by case when natural is preferable to processed, fresh to preserved, old to new, slow to fast, artisanal to industrial.

Such an ethos, and not a timorous Luddism, is what will impel us to create the matchless modern cuisines appropriate to our time.

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