

Food for Thought

BY CHRISTINE MCBURNEY

IT'S CENTRAL TO ALL OF HUMAN CULTURE. TO THE RISE AND FALL OF EMPIRES. TO OUR VERY IDENTITIES. IT'S FOOD, AND ALAN ROCKE'S HISTORY CLASS EXPLORED EVERY MORSEL.



Alan Rocke thinks Americans should eat bugs.

"There is no rational reason why we in the US shouldn't eat insects. They're nutritional and clean, once you cook them," says the CWRU history professor. Food taboos are just a taste of what his new history course, *Food in History*, served up last fall.

A historian of science whose research specialty is organic chemistry, the Henry Eldridge Bourne Professor of History has long counted food science and technology among his interests. He became curious about food study while working as a chemist at the US Food and Drug Administration in the late 1960s.

Prof. Rocke, who joined the CWRU faculty in 1978, has waited more than two decades to teach *Food in History*. When he arrived at the University, he spoke to the nutrition department about teaching the course, but because they already offered Nutrition 410, the History of Food and Nutrition, he abandoned his plan. Recently, when the department discontinued the course, the time was ripe for Prof. Rocke.

Like the old course, *Food in History* includes the history of nutrition. But it also addresses the social, cultural, and anthropological aspects of food, exploring everything from the agricultural revolution of the Neolithic era to the consumer revolution of the last generation. "I am learning how important and central the history of food is to other aspects of human history," Prof. Rocke says, "and how unjustly neglected it has been."

REPAST: ALAN ROCKE LED HIS CLASS THROUGH A CONSIDERATION OF FOOD IN HISTORY.

"Food is life," declared Prof. Rocke's syllabus. Nothing, he says, is more basic than food to us, not only to our bodies, but also to our cultures, our social interactions, and our very identities. Throughout history, Prof. Rocke points out, food has been inextricably interconnected with the development of agriculture and other technologies, with the rise and fall of empires, with increasing understanding of diet and nutrition, with laws and regulations, with the arts, with economic development and consumer culture, and with national, religious, and ethnic identities.

For example, he explains, food practices—in relation to nationality, class, and gender—help to create identity. "Just think of the vast array of ethnic food styles, not to mention the different preferences of men versus women, old versus young, high versus low society, within a single culture."

Also, he says, food equals technology and spirituality. "Food is technology in its production, processing, and distribution. Food is also an essential element of religious observation." He cites, for example, "Jewish kosher laws; or beef, which is prohibited to Hindus due to the sacred status of cattle; or the sacrament of Eucharist, which involves bread and wine; or Passover, with its food symbolism." Each of these many different dimensions of food has its history, which Prof. Rocke and his class explored.

Got Gruel?

Food appears to be on Americans' minds lately as organic food and products, herbal remedies, pesticides, and genetically engineered foods are frequent topics in the news. New books, like Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (Houghton Mifflin, 2001), will likely be included in Prof. Rocke's future syllabuses. In the meantime, he required his students to read Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, the 1906 novel best known for its effect on the United States meatpacking industry. The novel also builds a case for socialism. "This is literature and politics and food," exclaims Prof. Rocke.

Perhaps like nowhere else, film contains examples of food permeating our popular culture. Last winter, the film *Chocolat*, in which the decadent sweet is a panacea for a host of social problems, was shown in mainstream cineplexes and nominated for a best-picture Oscar. In Prof. Rocke's classroom, students viewed Martin Scorsese's 1993 film adaptation of the Edith

Wharton novel *The Age of Innocence*, for its illustration of elaborate Victorian table settings.

Prof. Rocke thinks these "food flicks" have common themes. "There is what might be called the cultural content of food ways—that food and drink are more than mere sustenance, but are expressions on the deepest level of our humanity, and of the various cultural forms and norms that humans have developed." He also points out that, on another level, there is the theme of cooking as a form of art, fully as expressive and creative—and important—as the other fine arts.

For visible evidence of food in history, Prof. Rocke's class, which numbered fourteen students, visited the Cleveland Museum of Art. Students were shown various depictions of food, artifacts, and containers for food, and they discovered a fourteenth-century French table fountain. The fountain has a hidden pumping mechanism that produces a continuous fountain of wine. "It is a mechanically ingenious device and a work of art," Prof. Rocke says.



TABLE WINE: ON A TRIP TO THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART, PROF. ROCKE AND HIS STUDENTS VIEWED THIS FOURTEENTH-CENTURY FRENCH TABLE FOUNTAIN.

Writing assignments ranged from exploring the evolution of table manners to examining ethnic food festivals among the Cajuns in Louisiana. For a lab assignment, the class held a historical potluck banquet for which each student was required to bring a dish and say a few words about it. Highlights included Indian ghee rice, whale soup, Provençal salad, and New York (eighteenth-century Dutch) cookies.

A recent letter to the editor of the *New York Times* chastised a writer for mistakenly referring to "furmity" (a type of gruel also known as frumenty) as "firmament." Anyone taking Alan Rocke's course would not have made the mistake. One of the books on his recommended reading list has a recipe for frumenty and other medieval delicacies such as Sawse Camelyne or Moustarde Brewette.

Food in History offered more than a smorgasbord of recipes, films, field trips, and potlucks. "The course gets students excited about history," Prof. Rocke says. And he is excited about the course. "I had a ball. I'm going to do it every year." 🍷

Contributing writer Christine McBurney was once a singing Renaissance waitress for her high school choir fund-raiser.

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