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Food Enigmas, Colonial and Postcolonial

Jamaican Food: History, Biology, Culture

Barry Higman

Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago:

University of the West Indies Press, 2008

xix + 580 pp. Illustrations. \$70.00 (cloth)

Puerto Rico en la olla: ¿Somos aún lo que comimos?

Cruz Miguel Ortíz Cuadra

Madrid: Ediciones Doce Calles, 2006

385 pp. \$40.00 (paper)

The Caribbean Multilingual Dictionary of Flora, Fauna and Foods in English, French, French Creole, and Spanish

Jeannette Allsopp

Kingston, Jamaica: Arawak Publications, 2003

lvi + 184 pp. Illustrations. \$55.00 (paper)

L'Alimentation des Noirs Marrons du Maroni:

vocabulaire, pratiques, représentations

Kenneth Bilby, Bernard Delpech, Marie Fleury, and Diane Vernon

Cayenne, French Guiana: Institut Français de Recherche Scientifique pour le Développement en Coopération (ORSTOM), 1989

xiii + 393 pp. Illustrations. Available online at [http://horizon.](http://horizon.documentation.ird.fr/exl-doc/pleins_textes/divers09-10/010010226.pdf)

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THE CARIBBEAN ISLANDS and their surrounding shores, although famous for sunshine, hurricanes, and outrages—some acknowledged, others forgotten—are not famed for their food. But the many-stranded and entangled story of food there is full of conundrums; and, like everywhere else, people there had to eat.

The region stands out in world history because it was the first place, ever, that adventurers from empires stretching across oceans, both east and west beyond Eurasia, could set out to produce food, far from Europe itself, which they would then peddle back home, with huge success. To do so,

though, they relied upon coercion and then slavery for their labor force, putting in place systems of chattel labor to which hereditary status was added. Those institutions lasted for 350 years. That brutal fact is closely linked to Caribbean food. Who came to the islands, and what they ended up eating, were outcomes that turned upon the organization of the pioneer societies into which they were, for the most part, dragged. These bits of seized land, then—the early agricultural equivalents of today's foreign-owned mines and oil wells—became tropical outposts in newly conquered lands, agrarian food factories for the delivery of desirable consumer goods not producible in temperate climes. Yet those who produced them would remain in chains for centuries.

Because they depended on coercion—violence, and its constant threat—these colonies were odd mixtures of the technically modern on the one hand and the socially ancient on the other. The insatiable need for cheap, politically defenseless labor led, over the course of centuries, to the importation of millions of culturally varied peoples from sub-Saharan Africa, and great masses of other newcomers, some from South Europe and its outliers (e.g., the Portuguese colonies, such as Cabo Verde), and many from different parts of Asia (such as China and India). Hence the islands and their surrounding shores were settings for the first multiracial, multilingual, and multicultural human conglomerates of the post-Columbian world. Those peoples represented a dizzying variety of culturally specific food knowledge and food preferences. Defenseless in new lands, they did what they could with what they knew culinarily, some of it remarkable. But they did so with difficulty.

The slave-based plantations gave a distinctive shape to the societies in which they became an everyday reality. Agrarian, deeply divided into free people and slaves, the islands were also divided by foods for export versus foods to eat. The people who did the growing were typically landless. Living in societies where whites were groomed to disdain even stooping to pick up a handkerchief, their labor was as degraded as they. (In the U.S. South, what

this really meant is still expressed by a familiar phrase there: “to work like a nigger.”)

The production of local foods varied in time and space, from island to island, and on nearby shores. Plantations were rarely locales for the production of local food. Where slaves were allowed to grow food for themselves, usually on inferior plantation land, they did so, at times with great success. Once free, they went on doing so in places like Haiti or Jamaica. The three islands that remained Hispanic longest—Cuba, Santo Domingo, and Puerto Rico—nurtured sturdy peasantries of their own. Today, these peasantries are disappearing under the combined pressures of rural poverty, quixotic Cuban reforms, food dumping by countries with subsidized agriculture, the seductions of McDonald’s, and other miracles of modernity.

Jamaica, the subject of Barry Higman’s masterful work, was a Spanish colony until 1655, and then a British colony until 1962. It was the largest, most profitable, and economically most important Caribbean colony of the United Kingdom. Though a great deal has been written about Jamaican history at large, few scholars ever looked seriously at its food history or the eating habits of its people. Higman’s book fills a real void, and does so handsomely. Nowhere in the literature known to me is there any historical conspectus of the food of an entire society that rivals *Jamaican Food* in completeness or in clarity.

What Higman does is uncover the connections of food to the rest of life: in his own words, he tries “to understand why Jamaicans eat what they eat, how they define Jamaican food and how their choices changed over time [because]... [t]hese are important questions that provide insight into the social, cultural, agricultural, economic and political history of Jamaica. In everyday life, these choices are at least as important as decisions as to whom to vote for and what to have faith in” (p.xvii).

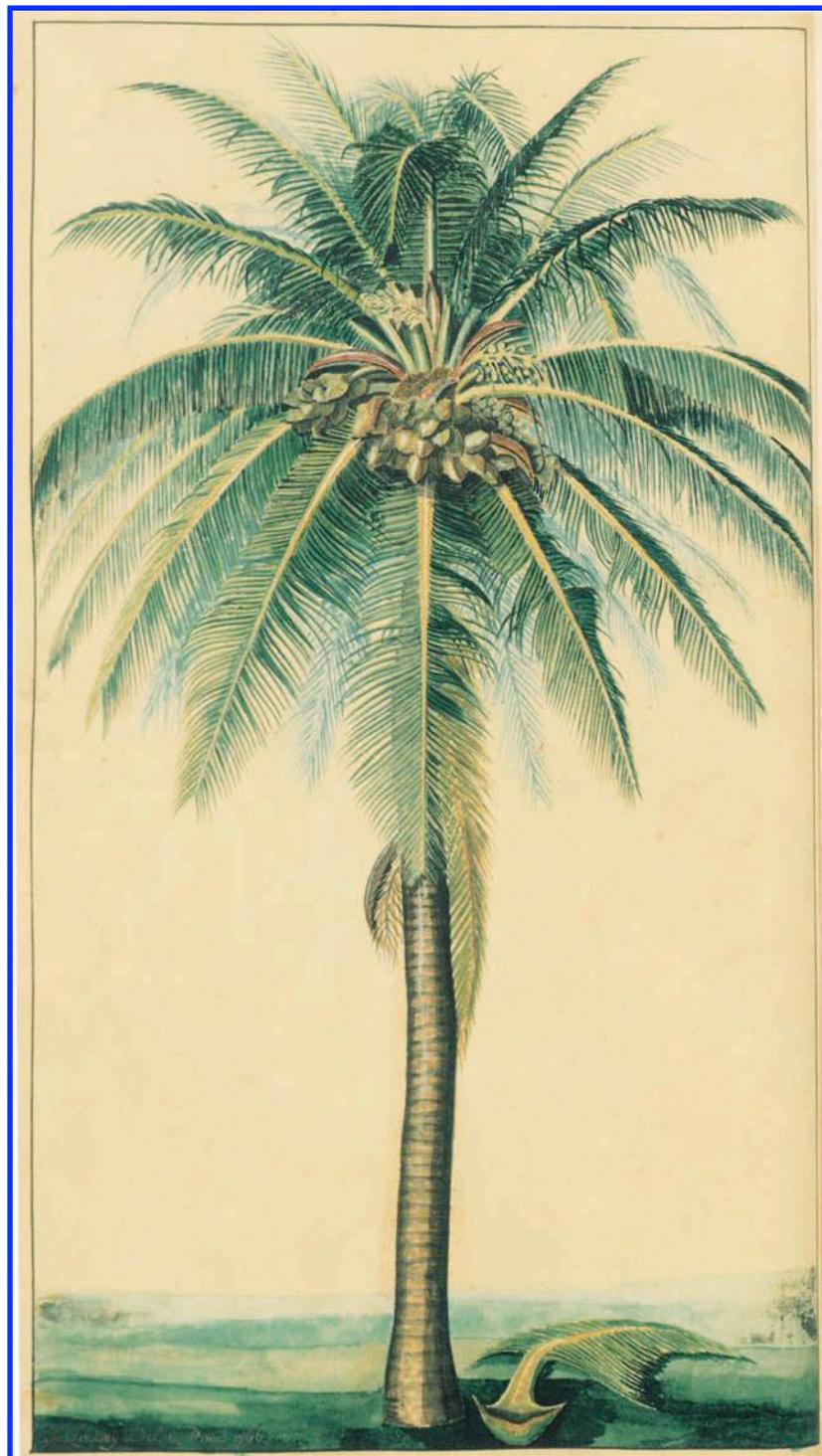
The bulk of the book consists of twelve simply written, enormously rich chapters, the titles of most of which—such as “Roots,” or “Stems, Leaves” or “Molluscs, Crustaceans, Insects, Reptiles”—are self explanatory. Chapter 11 is entitled “Salt, Earth, Water.” The concluding chapter consists of ten and one-half pages of text, plus two pages of illuminating historical world maps, Jamaica at their center. Except for the Rev. John Lindsay’s fine-colored natural history plates of 1770–1775, and a couple by W.J. Titford, the materials accompanying the text are elegantly simple drawings, showing, for example, the named parts of the inside of a mango; the anatomy of the green turtle; the edible parts of a pig; the processing equipment needed to prepare and detoxify *Manihot esculenta*, called cassava, or manioc; and some

reader-friendly graphs and charts. An appendix lists the foods mentioned, by popular and scientific names and, very helpfully, their dates of introduction to Jamaica.

So lucid is this book that the reader may be lulled into thinking that the text itself is unsubtle. It is not. Fundamental lessons in biology are intermixed with more sophisticated lessons in history and food sociology. Let me mention only three, the first being Higman’s gentle but remorseless examination of what Jamaicans actually do eat. That may sound silly, after what has been said here already. But Higman slowly untangles what Jamaicans actually eat from what they like, and from what they are said to eat. He lists what surveys dating from the late 1990s found to be the most commonly eaten foods, including *callaloo*, rice and peas, chicken, yellow yam, and green banana. Some of these commonly eaten foods—chicken in many forms, and rice and peas—are also among the most popular foods: people both like them and eat them. Better said, people like them and can afford to eat them regularly. On the other hand, ackee and salt fish (dried cod)—so loved by the tourism folks and touted relentlessly as *the* genuinely authentic Jamaican dish, loved by many if not most Jamaicans, and known to just about anyone who has spent even a few hours as a tourist in Jamaica—are not on the common food list. Salt cod costs too much. Price always figures heavily in how taste is accommodated.

There is irony here. Sir Eric Williams, the great Trinidadian historian, refers to the dependence of the Newfoundland fishery upon the shipment of dried salt cod to the West Indies and quotes an eighteenth-century writer who describes salt cod as “fit for no other consumption” but by slaves.¹ By the twentieth century, however, *bacalao* or *baccalà* (as we gourmets have learned to call it) was becoming too expensive for most Jamaicans.

A second case lies in Higman’s approach to the subject of *callaloo*, in which he demonstrates that exemplary care is the constant companion of his zeal. Describing and quoting historical works on Jamaica in which *callaloo* is discussed, he shows how the term has been used over time for several different plants from widely different botanical families—amaranths, chenopodiums, and phytolaccas—spreading thus across a vast botanical space. (Modern cookbooks may suggest spinach, which is a chenopodium, as a substitute; or collard greens or kale, which are brassicas.) The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century authors he quotes were not slouches; a number of solid early botanical identifications were made. But these wild, weedy plants are all edible; they are normally peeled, cut small, and stewed with many other ingredients; and there is no doubt that all were used



in such stews. The stews themselves were also called *callaloes*. Today, because a stew is composed of various things, *callaloo* is also used to mean an object or situation in which different ideas or substances are mixed together, more or less randomly. Cassidy and LePage's dictionary lists seven sorts of *callaloo*, noting that in recent usage, *any* green that is eaten may be called it.²

As Higman launches into the story of *callaloo* in Jamaica, historically and taxonomically, he makes clear that

Above: Rev. John Lindsay, Coconut Tree, 1766.

FROM B.W. HIGMAN, JAMAICAN FOOD: HISTORY, BIOLOGY, CULTURE (UWI PRESS, 2008), PLATE 7.

Jamaicans use the term both for “almost any green leafy vegetable” and for “a particular plant” (p.104). There is a plant called *callaloo*, which people grow in their gardens, identified by botanist C. Dennis Adams as *Amaranthus viridis*, and of which, Higman writes, “it is...certain that when Jamaican talk about ‘*callaloo*’ with specificity, they

mean *A. viridis*" (p.106). But Adams identified two other plants called *callaloo* by Jamaicans, plants which are also amaranths and are also used in *callaloo* stews and otherwise (*A. spinosus* and *A. dubius*). Adams identified a fourth plant that locals call *callaloo* that is not even an amaranth: *Phytolacca rivinoides*. Over more than two centuries, Jamaicans have been using all of these plants in their stews. There are no confusions about the separate botanical identities of these plants. But the term *callaloo*, used both as a local label for a particular plant, and as a handy name for plants of that sort, is indeed confusing. (In other places, of course, such as Trinidad, *callaloo* means yet other things.)

The *callaloo* that Jamaicans buy in markets or grow themselves today Higman describes as a fast-growing, weedy plant that can be peeled, chopped, and cooked, adding nutrients, vitamins, and a pleasant bitter taste to other foods. It is both popular and (I assume) affordable. I infer these leaves and stems are primarily *A. viridis*; but I dare to suppose that a bunch of such leaves might also contain one or more botanically different plants.

And, finally, there is Higman's examination of manioc (cassava). This is a rhizome or tuber, which is to say, its food material is stored underground. There were once said to be two "types" of manioc, bitter and sweet. But in truth there were varying quantities of cyanogenetic glucosides to be found in manioc plants; those with large quantities could be deadly if eaten undetoxified. Once thought classifiable into bitter and sweet *varieties*, it is now known that toxicity can vary with age, climate, and soil. There is only one species to which all varieties belong. This tuber—the world's only major poisonous food staple—was brought to the Antilles from the South American mainland by Arawakan-speaking pioneer farmers, after 500 A.D.

North Americans know one widely used cassava product: its flour, called tapioca and sold as "seeds" or "pearls" of starch—a common modern pudding ingredient made from the detoxified juice of the plant's underground tuber. The manioc itself was the single most important domesticated food source in pre-Columbian Amazonia; it is still a core feature of Brazilian cuisine, a major food of Native Amazonia, and the leading tuber food source in Africa today.

The aboriginal arrivants in the Antilles brought detoxification technology and tools from Amazonia, too. Higman supplies a flow chart of Jamaican cassava processing, with nice sketches of the processing tools. Detoxification is absolutely necessary, if there is any doubt about the quantity of cyanogenetic glucosides, to avoid death or physical damage. Interestingly, when manioc reached Africa, the effective detoxification method diffused unevenly with it, or

not at all. Among the documented negative health effects in Africa are nutritional neuropathies, chronic endemic goiters, and, in the worst cases, death from acute cyanide intoxication.

Once the chief "bread" of the Jamaican people, cassava meal baked into "bammy" cakes, only faintly altered from the ancient Arawak originals, was swiftly disappearing at the time when I was doing fieldwork in Jamaica in the 1950s. Higman points out that, though still greatly prized, the cassava flour won by much labor from this tuber could not compete with imported "minute cereals" and other less labor-intensive breadstuffs and porridge bases. But Caribbean migrants abroad still consume quantities of cassava flour.

Higman's conclusions take note of the local preference for salty, sweet, fat, and spicy hot, and the partial congruence of Jamaican taste with the fast foods that have diffused rapidly and globally. Though Jamaica's own fast foods add the hot-spicy taste—based to some degree on the capsicums, such as the Scotch Bonnet cultivar—to the other tastes, the similarities of their fast foods to the worldwide corporate specialties are many. Jamaican fast food flourishes alongside "international" fast food; and chicken (including feet, back, and gizzard) has become the flesh of choice. The Jamaican liking for animal protein is strong. That it has settled upon chicken more often than on pork or beef is largely to be explained by differences in cost. The chicken has become the rib steak and pork chop of the Caribbean poor. In terms of available animal protein, the outcome could, of course, be worse, as I have suggested in the case of the Marianas and Papua New Guinea.³ Higman calls attention to the way Jamaicans think of their dishes as potent national symbols, but he also makes plain that most Jamaicans must choose their daily foods in terms of their available time for shopping and cooking; their energy; and, of course, their pocketbooks.

As a historian, particularly of the British West Indies, who lived and taught in Jamaica during much of his professional life, Higman's grasp of that island's history is unparalleled. His book is a rich repository of knowledge, and because food is such an intimate and inescapable feature of daily life, one gets here an inside look at the food of a people, brought alive through time. The book is a handsome model for anyone who might aspire seriously to do the food history of a whole society. I urge its reading upon all students of food.

Like Higman's study, Ortiz Cuadra's *Puerto Rico en la olla, ¿Somos aún lo que comimos?* ("Puerto Rico in the Pot: Are We Still What We Ate?") is a pioneering work, one unfortunately not yet available in English. It is the first history of the foods and eating habits of the Puerto Rican

people, whose existence, if once in doubt, has recently been verified by the confirmation of Judge Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court. The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico is a U.S. possession (estimated 2010 population: 4.1 million), seized from Spain in 1898–1899.

The island is one of those Caribbean places that had sugar cane, slaves, and plantations as early as the mid-sixteenth century but was not a plantation colony—as I use the term here—until the end of the nineteenth century. For the preceding four hundred years there was a large population of free white and colored Spanish-speaking people, and slaves never exceeded 13 percent of the population. Sugar plantations became important after 1815 but then declined, only to be revived in wholly new form after the United States seized the island. Plantations have largely disappeared once more.

Unlike Jamaica, from the beginning Puerto Rico has had a substantial rural farm population growing a significant fraction of the island's food. While this type of farming was never completely eliminated by the plantation system, the proportion has been declining since 1899. On both islands, the talent for killing off local food production with cheap food, made possible by federal subsidies to agricultural producers in the United States, has been at work. In Puerto Rico especially, we've had a roaring success, because the farm subsidies on the mainland are backed by an ever-larger program of federal food stamps on the island. Our success can be measured in obesity and diabetes rates, fitness-club fees, ephedrine use, and other indices of modern life.

Ortíz, keenly aware of all this, traces the history of Puerto Rico's major foods: rice and beans; the aroids called *yautía* and *malanga* (one Old World, one New, which deserve a book of their own); the love/hate herb North Americans now call “cilantro” (*Coriandrum sativum*) along with *culantro*, an entirely different plant, equally essential to the magical (and somewhat mysterious) bundle of ingredients composing the *sofrito*, without which rice and beans are, well, rice and beans; and the staggering increases in Puerto Rican per capita meat consumption, which began rising in the 1950s.

Ortíz's book, published two years before Higman's, is organized in chapters that slightly resemble Higman's; but the two are very different. Ortíz seeks to tell us about the Puerto Rican people through their food in a noticeably more humanistic style than Higman employs for the Jamaicans. In considering the history and changing place of various foods in succession he makes frequent use of materials, much of it from novels, and from early reports.

Near the end of his story, Ortíz asks whether Puerto Ricans really are *still* what they ate. Whether one judges by the number of automobiles or TV sets, or by the number of families receiving governmental assistance (including food stamps), or by the foods once eaten that have now disappeared—some of which even this comparative newcomer wistfully recalls—there has been a sea change in the nature of Puerto Rican daily life. The grandchildren of people in the countryside who were suffering from malnutrition when I began working there in 1948 are suffering from obesity and diabetes today. Now there is little or no scarcity of food on the island. But there as here, a sorrowful decline of home cooking has been accompanied by decreases in physical activity; increases in salt, sugar, and fat consumption; and the loss of many traditional and once-loved foods. Puerto Ricans may still be what they eat; but what they eat is surely not what they ate before. Near the end of his story Ortíz wonders whether “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you who you are” will be replaced by “Tell me where you eat and I will tell you who you are”; or even “Tell me when you eat and I will tell you who you are.” Charming and learned, his book is also bittersweet. In both of these fine works one ends up wondering whether, finally, the question has to be: “Who really determines what choices are available?”

This is a region of many languages, not only those of the European settler/conquerors—Spanish, French, English, Dutch, among others—but also the creoles spoken by Haitians, Surinamers, Jamaicans, Trinidadians, and others. *Sechium edule*, the pale green cucurbit we North Americans have learned to call *chayote* (from Nahuatl *chayotl*), is called *chocho* in Jamaica, *christophene* in the Eastern Caribbean, *militôn* in Haiti, etc. Jeannette Allsopp's *Caribbean Dictionary* is a valuable first step toward the mastery of such complexity. A slim paperback, it represents sheer mountains of scholarly cooperation and years of work. Though understandably incomplete, it begins to bring some order to a veritable *calalú* of cuisines, and weirdos like this reader will find it a joy to browse.

Like Allsopp's *Dictionary*, *L'Alimentation* is the product of untold hours of cooperation, in this case among two anthropologists, a botanist, and a sociologist. It is a lexicon of the *alimentation* (perhaps best translated as foods and food habits) of the Maroons of the Maroni. The Maroons of the Maroni are three named tribes (Ndyuka, Aluku, Paramaka) descended from slaves who fled the seventeenth-century sugar plantations of Dutch planters on the Guianese mainland. These people, who speak a creole language heavily influenced lexically by English,

now live in the Maroni/Marowijne River region. The river is the uncertain boundary between French Guiana and Suriname. This work is a thesaurus of the everyday culinary (and, partly, both material and religious) life of these remarkable people. Only students whose daily work brought them into close association with the Maroons could have produced it. It should be mentioned that this was a product of unpaid, spare-time cooperation by people devoted to Maroon welfare, and working on medical research. Though primarily a lexicon or specialized dictionary, *L'Alimentation* is a source of valuable information at the junctures of food and religion on the one hand, and food and illness on the other. Though the book is catalogued by the Library of Congress and a copy of it reposes there, it is, to say the least, a difficult work to come by.

My aim here, beyond describing and sketchily evaluating these books, is to call attention to the richness and variety of food studies of a certain sort. All four of these works are by authors who had accuracy of reportage much in mind, and were willing to work mightily to achieve adequate detail. None of them is going to become a bestseller. Their authors deserve the praise—and warm thanks—of gastronomes everywhere. ☺

NOTES

1. Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944), 59.
2. Frederick G. Cassidy and Robert B. LePage, *Dictionary of Jamaican English*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).
3. Sidney W. Mintz, "Afterword," *Ethnology* 47:2 (2009): 129–135.