Candice Goucher

Congotay! Congotay!: A Global History of Caribbean Food. Armonk NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2014. xxi + 241 pp. (Paper US\$ 24.95)

For many years the social sciences and humanities kept their distance from food, a vulgar and mundane subject. Now that interdisciplinary food studies and food history are flourishing and popular, scholars are busy making up for lost time. Just in the last five years we have had innovative and creative books on Cuba, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and the Caribbean coast of Panama, as well as a number of solid edited collections. A growing consensus sees this region as the source of one of the world's first truly modern hybrid cuisines, a complex mix of diverse European and African foodways, on a base of Amerindian fruits, roots, and vegetables. More recently, the Caribbean diaspora has bred many cookbooks and memoirs, which capture the nostalgia of the emigrant, assert the singularity of particular islands and regions, synthesize diversity into a more generic "Caribbean Food," and develop new hybrids like "Afro-Vegan."

While historians of the African diaspora have tracked the foods and commodities *produced* by slaves, the question of what the slaves ate has only recently captured their interest. New scholarship on African American cuisine in the United States provides a valuable comparison with the Caribbean islands. The wider Atlantic world offers a unique opportunity to see how Spanish, French, Dutch, and English colonialism had different effects on the way people ate, and eventually on the many roles that food played in postcolonial nation-building.

Candice Goucher's "global history" of Caribbean food could have made a substantial contribution to this synthetic project. Unfortunately her work rarely draws on, or addresses the work of other food scholars, even those focusing on the Caribbean. *Congotay! Congotay!* is really about the British Caribbean, particularly Jamaica, Trinidad, and Barbados, in that order (based on the book's index). The most interesting and original portion is the first two chapters, not about the Caribbean per se, but more generally about early trade in foodstuffs and the diversity of African foodways that slaves brought with them to the New World. Goucher refutes the assumption that all slaves had a generic "African" food culture. She includes, for example, the extended interactions between Africans and slave traders in West Africa. Her description of slave food during the Middle Passage is fascinating, but far too brief.

As Goucher works through the plantation era, she uses the concepts of domination and resistance to understand the relationship between the foods of slave and master. Other recent Caribbean histories, such as Richard Burton's

Afro-Creole,¹ have rejected domination and resistance as an analytical tool. It does no justice to the many intermediate social categories between masters and plantation slaves, and to the creativity of cooks in developing many kinds of hybrid and creole cuisines that cannot be sorted into African or European. This is why Goucher's extended search for African survivals seems so old fashioned; why should *African* survivals surprise us any more than survivals of archaic European dishes like black cake? It is hard to see contemporary Caribbean food as evidence of the "triumph of African influences" (p. 83).

After we leave the era of slavery, Goucher's historical narrative breaks down into a series of unconnected discussions of sugar, alcohol, food and gender, food and tourism, and food and spiritualism, et cetera, mostly in the Anglophone Caribbean. I found this middle section of the book repetitive and hard to follow as it jumped from one topic to another, while peppering readers with generic recipes. Just like many of the examples, we never learn where these dishes are from, and why they are typical of the whole region. More seriously, there is scarcely a mention of poverty, fair trade, cheap imports, or the effects of migration and tourism. From reading this book you would not know that Caribbean diets have been transformed in the last thirty years by fast and frozen foods, as subsidized imports fill supermarkets and replace local products.

The Caribbean is a rich and varied culinary landscape, dynamic and creative, and it deserves better treatment, and at the very least a legible map. Those interested in a deeper and more complex food history should read Barry Higman's *Jamaican Food*,² and in every Caribbean country there are now local food historians and experts who are doing innovative work. In the end this book is disappointing and hard to classify; it is neither an academic history for specialists, nor a regional guide for travelers and undergraduates.

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1 Richard D.E. Burton, 1997, *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition and Play in the Caribbean* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press).

2 B.W. Higman, 2008. *Jamaican Food: History, Biology, Culture* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press).