

In these two books, Ken Albala focuses the reader’s attention on a subject commonly lacking in the discourse of the scientific revolution, the history of food. With these complementary works, Albala reminds us that the Early Modern Period (roughly 1450-1800) altered not only the perceptions of cosmology and physiology but also the perceptions of food and diet. For the historian of science, Albala’s works are a sharp reminder that food history directly informs discussions of health, medicine and chemistry.

In *Eating Right in the Renaissance*, Albala posits a question that should strike a familiar chord with the modern reader: what constitutes a healthy diet? For the modern cook, the local bookshop offers a bounty of advice on selecting and preparing ingredients to promote optimum health. For both the Renaissance and the modern physician, dietary regulation provides the best method for maintaining health. But the notion of what constituted a healthy diet in the Early Modern period differed sharply from our current conceptions of health, and Albala provides a lucid and engaging narrative on exactly what “eating right” meant.

Part of the challenge and appeal of this period stems from the fact that no single definition of health dominated medical practice. Albala divides his research into three timeframes that roughly correspond with the waxing and waning of specific medical theories. Period one (1470s-1530) covers a time in which dietary literature does not greatly differ from its medieval predecessors which were based on the Salernitan *regimen sanitatis*. Period two (1530s-1570s) focuses on the Galenic revival. Period three (1570s-1650) is a “departure from orthodoxy” in which personal experience and local customs often trumped medical dogma. By bracketing the text around this timeframe, Albala traces the heyday of humoral medicine and its influence on dietary practice.

*Eating Right* deftly explains why certain foods (such as melons) were considered off-limits and dangerous. In many cases a particular ingredient had many factors working against broad acceptance. Some foods were considered too common or uncouth for a refined dieter because of where they grew or even their external appearance. In the case of melons, the specific humoral qualities of the fruit and the fact that they spoiled so quickly relegated most melons to the realm of strictly taboo. Additionally, Albala draws out some evidence with regard to compliance with dietary advice. Unsurprisingly, health concerns did not always trump the wishes of diners to consume foods that they considered desirable. It may provide some stark consolation to the reader that our predilection for bad food choices has a history as nuanced as our inclinations to make healthier choices.

At the heart of *Eating Right* is an excellent overview of Renaissance physiology and nutrition. Albala does his best work when comparing the shifting concepts of diet and
health to larger social issues in chapters 5-7. The final chapter covering food and medicine lacks some of the theoretical elegance of the previous chapters and reads more like a laundry list of authors and topics, and Albala’s comparative framework is greatly muted in favor of listing the prevailing theories of various period writers.

_Eating Right_ is an important and ground-breaking work that covers new and inventive areas of food history. Rather than relying on the vagaries of culture or the trivia of food “firsts,” Albala’s book looks to historical sources to see what people wanted to eat and why. This text will be highly useful for a class targeted at food history or as a complement to more traditional approaches in a class on the scientific revolution.

_Food in Early Modern Europe_ begins with a timeline of important food-related events from 1492-1765. This simple arrangement of dates, places and events vividly illustrates one of Albala’s central propositions: food was (and is) one of the driving forces of history. In this lively and broad book, food is treated as an “integrated whole,” a story in which the religious, social and economic threads of food history are combined to weave a vibrant and interesting tapestry. This approach enables Albala to address not only what people ate but why they wanted to eat particular foods prepared in specific ways.

The sheer scope of topics covered in _Food’s_ seven relatively short chapters make this book a fine general introduction to the spectrum of potential issues in Early Modern food history. Albala ranges from ingredients to religious implications, even touching on regional issues and diet and nutrition. While the introductory chapter clearly states that this work is intended for a lay audience or perhaps an undergraduate seminar, the professional historian can certainly find fertile soil here to nurture more in-depth research topics.

Of particular interest to historians of science, technology and medicine is the book’s attention to the strong connections between food and medicine that existed in this period. These details are missing from far too much of the food history literature, and Albala’s inclusion is a refreshing change. Far too much of the historiography of food focuses solely on culture and completely ignores the physiological and medicinal roles that food played in everyday life.

Albala’s rather casual approach in _Food_ is not without small drawbacks, especially in the light of his intended general audience. The book is structured to work as both a linear read-through and as a reference work. For example, the reader interested in the development of Dining Establishments could open the book to the latter part of chapter three and find a fine overview of the topic. However, due to the sequencing of chapters, concepts are occasionally introduced without satisfactory clarification. The prime example is in chapter two’s overview of ingredients. In detailing the value and use of ingredients, there are several mentions of the humoral qualities of a particular ingredient without the necessary context of exactly what humoral qualities are or why it would matter that an ingredient is “cold” or “moist.” Chapter six does provide an excellent summary of both humoral pathology and Paracelsian chemistry, but as this appears after the section on ingredients, some of the explanatory power of chapter two might be lost on a general audience.