J.D. La Fleur


J.D. La Fleur’s *Fusion Foodways* ably contributes to several important debates in Atlantic and African history. First, La Fleur responds to longstanding calls to incorporate the history of Africans in Africa as “integral to understanding Atlantic history as a whole” (192). Second, his careful analysis of foodways in Africa’s Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) from the period prior to European intervention in the region to the mid-nineteenth century challenges assumptions about the immediate character of agricultural revolution and the chronologies of crop adoptions and repertoires. Third, he features Africans themselves as agents in the development of new agricultural and subsistence strategies. Finally, he considers carefully the social, political, and environmental contexts in which people made crop and dietary choices.

A long-standing literature has signaled the importance of New World foods introduced into European diets and a recent flourishing scholarship has demonstrated how Africans made crucial contributions to American agriculture and cuisine during the era of the slave trade. But, until recently, we knew much less about what Africans grew and ate prior to European contact and how Africans responded to the arrival of new dietary regimes and foods on the ships of traders and slavers from Europe and the Americas. La Fleur draws upon contemporary records, turning especially to linguistic methodologies to analyze vocabularies (such as “loan words”) for specific foods and processes, to interrogate longstanding historiographies of African agriculture and subsistence and trace chronologies of adoption and adaptation.

The first chapter explores the food strategies of people living in the Gold Coast before 1500, where African yams in forest zones and sorghum and millet in savannas emerged as important foods. Long periods of experimentation, accompanied by regionalized specialization, adaptations to micro-environments, and the development of gendered, social and political hierarchies to organize agricultural labor and control prestige foods such as yams and palm wine, testified to diverse and sophisticated subsistence systems. West Africans also developed a range of food strategies to resist famines.

In the next two chapters, La Fleur offers a compelling analysis of Gold Coast responses to the arrival of the Portuguese, other Europeans, and enslaved Africans from outside the region beginning at the end of the fifteenth century. The inability of Europeans to provision themselves exclusively from European supplies compelled them to foster local cultivation of their dietary staples—including wheat (which failed), Iberian millet, American crops such as maize,
and Asian rice—and the preparation of the cuisine they preferred. West African cultivators and food preparers, often women, responded to this new situation with careful experimentation and adaptation. La Fleur emphasizes that Africans did not automatically embrace all European importations, but approached them with local knowledge and expertise that allowed them to choose foods appropriate to particular ecologies and social and political contexts. Adoptions of new foods occurred neither automatically nor uncritically.

Moreover, the concentration in port cities of increasing numbers of slaves destined for shipment to the Americas created further problems for administrators and traders. European merchants found themselves compelled to trade in African yams, millet, and sorghum (so as not to waste European foods or sicken slaves accustomed to different diets) and, ultimately, to draw upon plantains to “bridge the transportation gap” (71). La Fleur argues that contrary to conventional wisdom, plantains post-date European contact with the Gold Coast and arrived with Central African farmers brought as slaves by the Portuguese to serve their needs in African ports.

Thus, the Gold Coast proved a site of converging foodways constituted by local inhabitants, Portuguese and other Europeans, and a wider African diaspora. La Fleur offers intriguing descriptions of how West Africans participated in this process: farmers sought “cultigens that would supplement existing subsistence strategies” (105); traders took advantage of a growing and diverse consumer market; political agents tried to enhance their status and authority by defining and controlling prestige foods; “big men” mandated growing plantains because their relatively easier cultivation freed more labor for gold-mining (107-8); and culinary specialists adapted maize into kenkey, eschewed baked bread for the more regionally adaptive ashcakes and bolos, and ultimately—at the very end of the Atlantic era—harnessed the potential of cassava (manioc) as first a hunger food and then a dietary staple. Indeed, the problem of adapting cassava by and for West Africans forms the material for his fifth chapter.

La Fleur also emphasizes “unforeseen and unintended socio-economic, dietary, and cultural consequences” of this transition (15). For example, West Africans quickly perceived the relative advantages involved in maize adoption. However, they lacked access to Mesoamerican knowledge about how to prepare it to avoid maize-related nutritional deficiencies, such as pellagra, which compromised mental and physical health when consumers ate maize-centered diets (148-52). New food regimes, agricultural systems, and the social and political structures that maintained them contributed to sustaining an ever-expanding slave nexus. Furthermore, repeated and sometimes prolonged subsistence crises in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries aggravated and sometimes generated by war, an intensifying slave trade, and growing