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We Are Also What We Eat With

By Claire Stewart

A review of *Consider the Fork: A History of How we Cook and Eat* by Bee Wilson (Basic Books, 2012)

Bee Wilson's *Consider the Fork* is more than just a pretty book (and it is indeed a pretty book). It is more than just another one-topic text to be added to the book shelves of culinary geeks. This volume can happily settle in next to heavyweight culinary benchmarks such as Harold McGee's *On Food and Cooking* (1984), which showed the kitchen to be a laboratory that produces edible experiments, and anthropologist Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power* (1958), which tracked how the use of sugar shaped history and the Western palate.

In *Consider the Fork*, Bee Wilson uses historical facts and informational tidbits to expound on the history of cooking equipment. Chapters entitled "Knife," "Measure," "Fire," and "Grind" exemplify the author's straight-ahead technique. She comes quickly to her thesis. Kitchen utensils are not mere inanimate objects designed to make cooking easier and to provide tastier food. Rather, kitchen tools have shaped the way we cook, and fashioned the manner in which we eat and shaped our civilization in unexpected ways.

So, what of the fork? Wilson tells us that this utensil was once an object of suspicion associated both with the devil's pitchfork and aspiring dandies. One story tells of a Byzantine princess frivolous enough to use a fork. Her punishment was death by plague. Four hundred years later the use of forks was still being ridiculed as effeminate (except by

the Italians, who knew that fork tines made eating pasta easier). Even as late as 1897, British sailors were said to demonstrate their manliness by refusing to eat with forks.

Wilson next moves across the globe to discuss the ways in which people bring food to their mouths in the East. China alone throws away 23 billion pairs of disposable chopsticks a year, a number so great that the wood preferred for their construction is in short supply. The poplar trees of Georgia are now filling in, enabling the shipment of billions of chopsticks to China every year, every set emblazoned "Made in the USA."

Wilson writes that so much of what we think of food and taste preferences are actually the aftermath of technological changes and environmental conditions. In "Fire" she notes that the traditional English craving for roasted meat is based not on a mere predilection, but on habitat. Firewood was in great supply in the eighteenth and nineteenth century English countryside, and vast hearths meant to warm homes could be used to roast and soften large cuts of meat. The lush countryside offered room and grass aplenty for cows to graze, resulting in a simple cuisine based on large cuts of meats roasted simply over large wood-consuming fireplaces. Parisian homes, by contrast, were not surrounded by densely forested land, and thus the French sought creative and increasingly complicated methods (and accompanying equipment) in order to prepare their meals. Chinese cuisine, too, stems from a lack of fuel, and was inspired by necessity. While the English could rely on their blazing fires to break down their large joints of meat, wok cookery demanded small pieces of meat that could be cooked quickly with minimal fire or fuel. This led to the creation of the "tou," the versatile Chinese cleaver borne of a society that also early mastered cast-iron metal-making and saw the wisdom of a knife that ensured precise slicing.

Wilson writes that the eighteenth century saw a significant change not in *what* food was eaten, but *how* food was eaten. Average Westerners began to eat with forks and blunt knives, cutting their meals into small pieces before consuming. Prior to this time, large cuts of meat were grasped in one hand and with the mouth, while the eater sawed off and released cuts of food with a sharp knife. By the eighteenth century, this "stuff and cut" method, so labeled because large pieces of food were "stuffed" in the mouth and then sliced off, began to be replaced by the act of chopping food into bite-sized morsels *before* being put in the mouth. The sharp blade once possessed by every diner became blunter, no longer needing to be razor sharp in order to saw off food midair, and forks now lifted morsels to mouths.

Bee Wilson writes a weekly food column in England, has been named the BBC Radio's Food Writer of the Year, and has published other food-themed books, including the captivating *Swindled: The Dark History of Food Fraud, from Poisoned Candy to Counterfeit Coffee*. Her talent for turning prosaic topics into intriguing reads is foreshadowed in *Sandwich: A Global History*. There Wilson freshened the oft-told story of the Earl of Sandwich (and his desk-bound meals of sliced meat in bread) with early "sandwich" references in literature, moving on to an amusing interview with the storied Earl's great great great great great great grandson. In the weightier *The Hive: The Story of the Honeybee and Us* Wilson coupled her gift for research with accounts of how the lore of honeybees has seeped into human history, politics and literature.

Ultimately, Bee Wilson tells us that food tools, like the mixing spoon and the carving knife, continue to survive because they do what they do so well. In the age of molecular gastronomy, Wilson notes that some kitchen tools do not need to be improved, and that their very use connects us to the rituals of our ancestors. Wilson rounds out her discussion with the observation that no matter how far technology drives us to search for new ways to cook, what truly spurs humans is our desire to use that technology. And that technology is often tied to the memories of how food was prepared when we were young.

This chef has only one teeny qualm with Wilson's research, and that concerns the author's discussion of the use of vegetable peelers. The book states that entrepreneur Sam Ferber designed his OXO peeler to assuage arthritis pain his wife was feeling while peeling potatoes, and that his new ergonomically designed peeler was a "game changer" for 1990s kitchens. I do not remember this, because professional chefs in the 1990s used the same peelers as they did in the 1980s, and the same peelers they use now: the "Y" or "Swiss" peeler, not mentioned in the book, but quietly sold in restaurant supply stores then as now.

Consider the Fork is adorned with Annabel Lee's charming line drawings and is also enriched by the author's small entries at the end of every chapter, in which she briefly considers specific items such as Jell-O molds, tongs and the egg timer. The author takes pains to credit numerous sources in her notes and bibliography.

Perusing elaborate recipes with no intention of preparing them has long been an American passtime. Cookbooks and magazines (and now blogs and television shows)

crammed with impossible and complex recipes have long been enjoyed as reading material, rather than actual instructive material. *Gourmet Magazine,* for instance, debuted in 1941, at the height of food rationing in wartime America. Few readers would have had the supplies to prepare the butter and meat-laden recipes within the magazine, yet surely that was not the intent of the publication. The spectacle of glossy unattainable "centerfolds" featuring complicated recipes and unavailable products was meant to keep the American dream of prosperity alive, most especially in a time of deprivation. "Food porn," is everywhere now, consumers' psyches nudged by depictions of glamorous yet mindful cooking, whether your kitchen be "green," vegan, locavore, or just gourmet.

Consider the Fork fills another niche. It can satisfy literate foodies who crave more than recipes and pictures. Wilson offers her readership an astute study of food preparation and accompanying societal consequences. She offers culinary factoids in this age of celebrity chef worship, yet also examines our society as a whole, pushing into historical territory untrod by weekend Food Network couchsurfers.

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