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Book Review of, California Cuisine and Just Food

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Citation Details

Book Review: Fairfax, Dyble, Guthey, Gwin, Moore, and Sokolove, California Cuisine and Just Food, by Nathan McClintock. Pacific Historical Review. Vol. 83, No. 1 (February 2014) (pp. 172-173).

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California Cuisine and Just Food. By Sally K. Fairfax, Louise Nelson Dyble, Greig Tor Guthey, Lauren Gwin, Monica Moore, and Jennifer Sokolove. (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, xvii + 354 pp. $50 cloth, $25 paper)

Asking "does a maker of expensive, artisanal cheese really share priorities with an impoverished migrant farmworker from the Central Valley?" (p. 3), this book traces the unlikely but definitive pairing of *haute cuisine* and social justice within the San Francisco Bay Area's food movement. While their broad brushstrokes may leave historians wanting more detail and human geographers demanding more rigorous engagement with theory, the authors rightly opt for accessibility, going so far as to suggest that those with little patience for theory just "give it a try, perhaps paired with a dense syrah" (p. 3). The authors employ the concept of the industrial district to explain the growth of alternative food production, distribution, and consumption practices. First theorized by economic geographer Alfred Marshall in the 1890s, an industrial district (e.g., Silicon Valley or Hollywood) is an agglomeration of enterprises bound by ideas, social relationships, shared infrastructure, markets, and labor. It ultimately fosters "a sense of common enterprise" (p. 22), and, in the case of the Bay Area "alternative food district," a common suite of ecological- and justice-oriented values.

The authors point to the region's "mixture of climate and geography, immigrant skills, cuisines, rootstocks, university support, and ready cash for entrepreneurial investment" (p. 225) as factors undergirding the district's origins and maturation over the last four decades. Central to the story are the movement's "mavens," key players who privileged community over profit, sharing innovative models of production, distribution, and consumption with others eager to participate in the growing network. Such linkages—strengthened by proximity and the small scale of production—not only facilitated transfers of the necessary knowledge and skills to new entrepreneurs and activists, but also "helped to erode distinctions between urban and rural, bringing, for example, urban expectations about minimum wage to farms and rural concern for the preservation of working landscapes and processing infrastructure to cities" (p. 225).

Part I lays the theoretical and historical groundwork with an excellent overview of relevant food-systems scholarship, followed by a brief history of the rise of conventional capitalist agribusiness and food retail in California, and of the "Discontents" who mobilized in

opposition throughout. These included early proponents of organic gardening; consumer advocates concerned about food quality and rising costs; buyers' cooperatives seeking to bypass supermarket retail hegemony; labor organizers challenging exploitation of migrant workers in the fields; environmentalists drawing connections between the energy crisis and the price of food. Part II then focuses in on the "waves of innovation" (p. 90) arising from these Discontents and raised expectations for food quality, environmental sustainability, and justice. The roots of the district's unique combination of taste and values were overtly political, counter-cultural efforts to improve access to healthy food in the 1960s and 1970s, which, when paired with the French-inspired cuisine at the nucleus of Berkeley's Gourmet Ghetto, gave rise to a regional cuisine that was "simultaneously radical and haute . . . a critical proving ground for developing alternatives to the increasingly toxic conventional system" (p. 108).

One of the book's greatest contributions is its discussion of the contradictions, ambiguities, and growing pains intrinsic to the district's development. For some, scaling up implied a departure from the values and relationships central to the district's origins. For others, emphasis on environmental issues and the farmer/owner obfuscated continued exploitation of migrant laborers, while farm-to-table regional cuisine smacked of elitism, out of reach to low-income residents. A chapter on food justice activism in Oakland (arguably a Marshallian district in its own right) and new models of food-system labor organizing highlights efforts in the district to overcome these tensions.

The district's story challenges a common food studies claim that a growing emphasis on individual choice and behavior undermines more overtly political collective action. The authors contend that "sharp distinctions between markets and politics—between voting with your fork versus changing policy—are unfounded and counterproductive" (pp. 229–230). This book provides a useful and accessible framework and similar examinations of other alternative food districts (e.g., Oregon, Vermont, North Carolina) will hopefully follow its lead. The authors are cautious, however, and place the district's triumphs over conventional agri-food in perspective: "David is a memorable hero because Goliath usually wins" (p. 229).

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