**<Book review>**

**Culinary Capital**, by Peter Naccarato and Kathleen Lebesco. London & New York, Berg, 2012, ix, 145 pages, RRP - 29.99 GBP, Paperback ISBN 978-0-85785-383-7, eBook ISBN 978-0-85785-415-5.

Peter Naccarato and Kathleen Lebesco use a broad cultural canvas of television cookery shows, online grocers, restaurant reviews, eating contests, junk food websites and blogs, to analyse everyday practices around food and how these confer status, identity and power. Such understandings allows a glimpse of food that is not just restricted to its nutritional or monetary value and instead offers a sociological perspective on how and why food has come to mean so much in contemporary society.

Following in Bourdieu’s wake, their aim is to expose the workings of culinary capital – the ways in which ‘food and food practices act as markers of social status’. The book is a record of how such values associated with food are assigned, reassigned and contested, making them work in multiple, unexpected and contradictory ways. They deepen their theoretical analysis of such battles over culinary capital by using Foucault’s work on bio-power and Rose’s work on identity construction, and the conferring of status.

Three of the substantive chapters focus on meal assembly businesses, television cookery shows and restaurant criticism. In each, they in turn explore how consumers who take part in innovations in the food production and distribution industry (online grocery shopping for instance) may do so as part of their project of Self, adding to, and valuing a particular form of culinary capital. Similarly the Food Network channel is shown to play its own problematic part in helping such capital circulate, by promoting a ‘model of good citizenship’, and offering particular knowledge and practices of which it requires viewers to partake. The chapter on restaurant criticism analyses the online proliferation (Chowhound, Citysearch, etc.) of a once elite practice that defined good food. Paradoxically, such apparent democratisations of practice also keep the focus every more fixed on the professional culinary elite.

In each of these sites, traditional notions of culinary capital, of privileged food practices are the main object of focus. Perhaps it is chapter 5, which deals with ‘culinary resistance’ and ‘countercuisine’, that is of particular interest to educators, or indeed to anyone who has pondered over the discrepancy between what might be advocated to pupils (or adults for that matter) as privileged culinary capital (healthy eating and lifestyles) and the choices that they may end up enacting. Naccarato and Lebesco analyse carnivals and state fairs in the United States where healthy eating norms are joyously and raucously upturned. Consumers of unhealthy and excessive or exotic eating in these fairs seem to revel in the pleasures of escaping an uptight norm, even if only temporarily. The fact that they can return to more restrained practices and that they claim to do so, underscores the predominance of the healthy eating and living discourse while undermining it at the same time.

Similarly, junk food websites and blogs exhibit the vociferous participation of “junk foodies” who establish a space for unapologetic consumption, in defiance of a culinary elitism. The work of the International Federation of Competitive Eating (IFOCE), promoting the “sport” of eating, hyping quantity over, quality, speed over slow enjoyment, and ignoring the sophisticated skills of professional, elite chefs demonstrates the demand for alternative culinary capitals. Such deviance and resistance to established wisdom thus also carves out a certain kind of culinary capital within its upside down world.

The authors’ observation that the profileration of such alternative capitals has led to a greater hybridization of privileged and non-privileged food practices, and that this leads to a new model of culinary capital provides much room for thought. Rather than ‘dissent’ being contained in the space of resistance, they point to a new form of citizenship where pleasure and responsibility, excess and restraint become equally important. Rather than the ‘high’ and ‘low’ or ‘good’ and ‘bad’ food practices remaining distinct from each other, they are being constantly reshaped from within, by consumers who cross these boundaries in knowing ways. The implications that such an understanding opens up for education and educational research are exciting and promising.

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