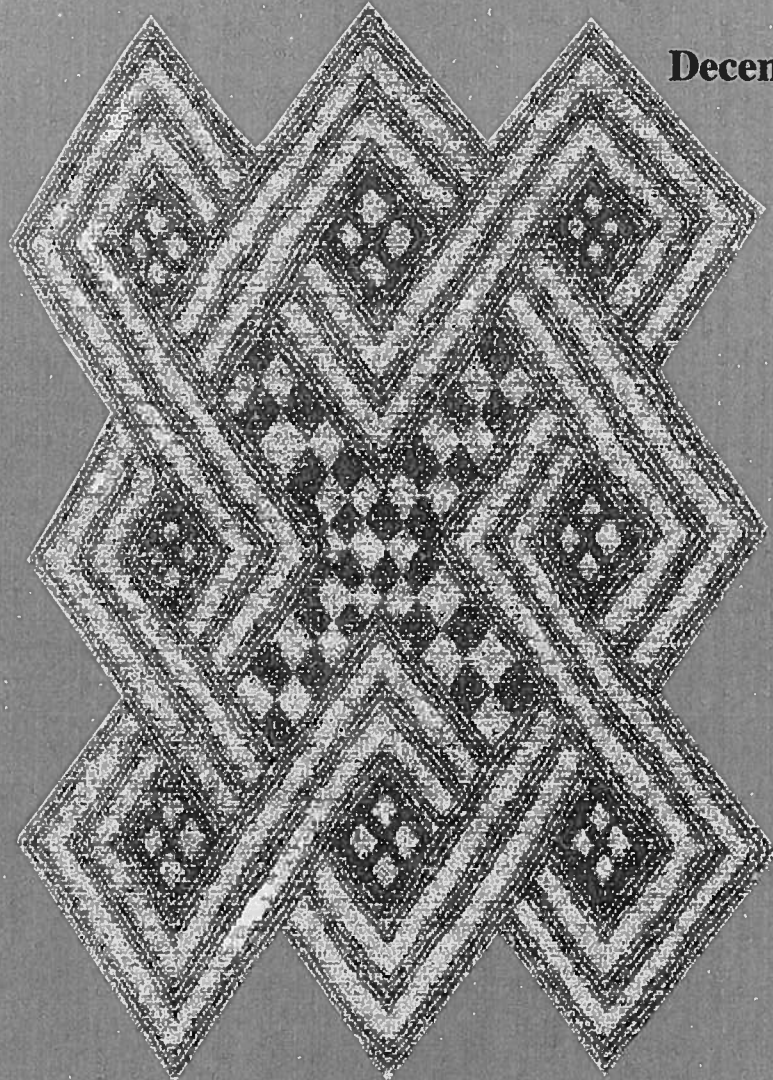




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**Stirring the Pot: A History of African Cuisine.** James C. McCann. Ohio University Press/ C. Hurst and Co., 2010, pp. 215. ISBN 978-1-084904-035-8 (hb) 978-1-84904-036-5 (pb) £12.99

*Stirring the Pot* is modestly practical and enormously ambitious at the same time. Perhaps it is this combination that makes it both an introductory and a knowledgeable work. It brings together a wealth of historical knowledge about the continent of Africa (largely excluding North Africa, the cuisines and food pathways of which have received considerable attention), focused around food production, storage, preparation and consumption. It also attends to the work of women in these activities, to the environmental contexts for the similarities and differences of the areas in which the writer chooses to find coherence, to the large scale performance of food in national definition, and to the detail of daily labour around food – to name but a few of the disciplinary areas invoked.

The book moves from an overview of the occurrence, introduction and movement of ingredients basic to today's African food often from the 'New World' over the past 500 years, via the apparently anomalous constitution of food as a national cuisine in Ethiopia in the 1880s, to commonalities that re-draw Africa into West African groundnut stew and Jolloffe rice, the north-south central maize belt, and the east-south-west maritime coast plethora of traditions carried on the spice routes. It then returns to a few disaporic instances of African cookery in the 'New World'. The prose is reflective, borne along by a series of narratives rather than arguments, in a prose that balances scholarly insight with cultural commentary.

McCann consistently foregrounds the labour of women in the conveying of cookery practices, although he makes no systematic attempt to compare gendered labour structures among the different communities and polities he studies. Yet the focus allows him to suggest that differences such as the existence of publically provided food from street-sellers or 'restaurants' in West Africa and the non-existence of such foodways in Ethiopia until the twentieth century, are part of the different social activity of women in these two areas. There is no analysis of the position of women or their familial structures that might help us understand some of the transmission of the traditional knowledge they enact, yet the inclusion of passages such as Audrey Richards' account of Bemba women preparing and cooking millet makes partially accessible aspects of the embodied knowledge that is so central to the world of food studies.

The book also draws attention to the complexity of the recipe, or 'culinary text' as McCann puts it, and worries about the loss that occurs between the tacit knowledge of the person who learns about cooking from observation and trial and error, and the often sparse written receipt that takes so much for granted.

Yet one of the books riches is the inclusion of extensive texts: from those mined for information about Queen Taytu's feast in 1887, to Margaret Field's survey of 'Gold Coast' cooking, to the long list of insect recipes compiled by a group of European women in Malawi. The quotations are extensive, and the repetitions and rhythms allow the reader to begin to find grounds for understanding the cuisine. Indeed McCann argues that most of the evidence for culinary heritage is found in the 'living transcripts of daily cooking'.

So much of the analysis is based on foodways established by colonialism and the modern civic notion of slavery, that the interaction of external countries with the development of African cuisine is proportionally sparse. McCann carefully acknowledges the existence of the slave trade, even at one point describing the balanced diet of a slave chattel ship as 'economic' rather than 'humane'. Nevertheless, more could have been said, and places where stark comparisons appear without comment are difficult to decipher. The enormous influence of Latin American foods on African diet avoids direct discussion of health issues while pointing to them – for example by way of a photograph of what appears to be a health document on the 'Nutritional value of cassava' (virtually nil except for its calories), with little accompanying context. Perhaps this is the authorial style, intended to excise 'judgmental' statements. Perhaps it is one of the few ways this author could grasp issues that focus on food and cuisine in Africa, and keep the narrative under control. But it's also the case that he doesn't choose to foreground them in the epilogue's suggestions for 'questions that need asking', and evades colonialism with the term 'cosmopolitan'. There may be good reasons for this but they are not discussed.

The epilogue offers a good scan of existing sources in the field, and the bibliography is excellent. McCann has used a wide range of materials from histories, to novels, to social studies, invoking the transdisciplinary methodology of many food studies. When a writer attempts to open up a field it's a necessary condition that not everything can be done. But this book does a lot of work, and is an eminently readable account that people from the public and academic worlds can turn to when generating new ways of thinking about African food and cuisine.

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