Casey Taylor

Cookbook Report

Anthropology of Food

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The Food Matters Cookbook

In American society today, the number of health concerns related to diet is constantly increasing. Not only has this directly affected medicine and health care costs, but it has also increased the awareness and understanding that change needs to start with the foods that we eat. Many of the health problems that Americans have developed in recent years can be easily lessened, or even completely reversed, by making a switch to a more plant-based diet. In The Food Matters Cookbook, Mark Bittman provides over five hundred recipes that are simple, plant-based, and delicious in order to encourage people to live a healthier lifestyle.

For many Americans, the thought of excluding meat from their diets would be considered blasphemy, un-American, and utterly unmoral. Bittman thought so too. At first. It was a visit to his doctor which made him aware of his growing list of health concerns and it was recommended that he to switch to a vegan diet. This began to change his thinking. Not only did Bittman’s doctor recommend him to switch to a vegan diet to improve his health, but there are also many other sources in today’s society which advocate that a plant-based diet with minimal or no animal products is the most effective for maintaining good health. A vegan diet not only reduces one’s levels of cholesterol and blood pressure, therefore reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease, but also is believed to decrease the risk of many forms of cancer. Upon hearing this, it seems rather clear that a vegan diet is the better option, however there is still a great amount of resistance in America to giving up foods like meat and cheese which have long been staples of the American diet. Although the focus of his cookbook is on consuming plants, Bittman does include information about the most “healthy” and ethical sources of meat in order to appeal to the portion of his readers who are hesitant to completely remove animal products from their diets.

In order to assist his readers as much as possible in changing to a plant-based or vegan diet, Bittman incorporates charts into his cookbook for easy produce substitutions. He arranges them by season and includes sections on staple pantry items and even “advanced” pantry items for those who are more curious and ambitious (Bittman, 18, 25, 30). Throughout the recipes, he uses simple terms, such as “cook” and “bubble”, rather than more complicated culinary terms. By doing so, Bittman avoids any overwhelming words that may intimidate some readers and turn them away from attempting to cook one of his recipes. Bittman’s aim is to provide the general American public with simple and easy vegetable forward recipes. He wants to encourage them to easily redefine their diet and no longer rely on the “American convention of putting meat at the center of the plate with a starch and a vegetable on the side” (Bittman, 33). His recipes also feature a number of simple, easy to obtain ingredients and foolproof options for specific ingredient substitutions. These options serve the purpose of altering the flavor of the dish to appeal more to the cook’s personal taste and ability.

Another way that Bittman further encourages healthy eating is through his arrangement of the sections of the cookbook by the type of dish or the main plant-based ingredient. He purposefully does not put any emphasis on the few animal based products included in some recipes. In fact, many of the recipes only include an animal based component in the ingredient substitution notes. As an example, the recipe for “Super-Lemony Kidney Beans” in the beans section of the cookbook is completely vegan as the recipe is originally written. At the end of the recipe and instructions, Bittman includes a small paragraph explaining how one would adjust the recipe if he or she desired to incorporate chicken into the dish (Bittman, 364-365). By leaving the chicken as an option in the recipe, and also requiring the cook to read entirely through the recipe before he or she realizes the addition of chicken is even an option, increases the likelihood that the cook will decide that chicken is not necessary to add to the dish. It is also possible that the cook my not even see the paragraph at all.

The cultural view of diet in American society is slowly shifting as more information becomes available about the harmful impact that consuming animal products has on our health and the unsustainability and harm that raising animals for consumption has on the environment. Bittman puts forth a valiant effort in The Food Matters Cookbook to educate his readers and provide them with simple and delicious plant based recipes to encourage them live a more plant-based lifestyle. The ingredients are simple and easy to find, the recipes are creative and appeal to various tastes and dietary preferences, and his manner is quite encouraging. All of these elements combine to make The Food Matters Cookbook an excellent resource for Americans who are attempting to clean up their diets.

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