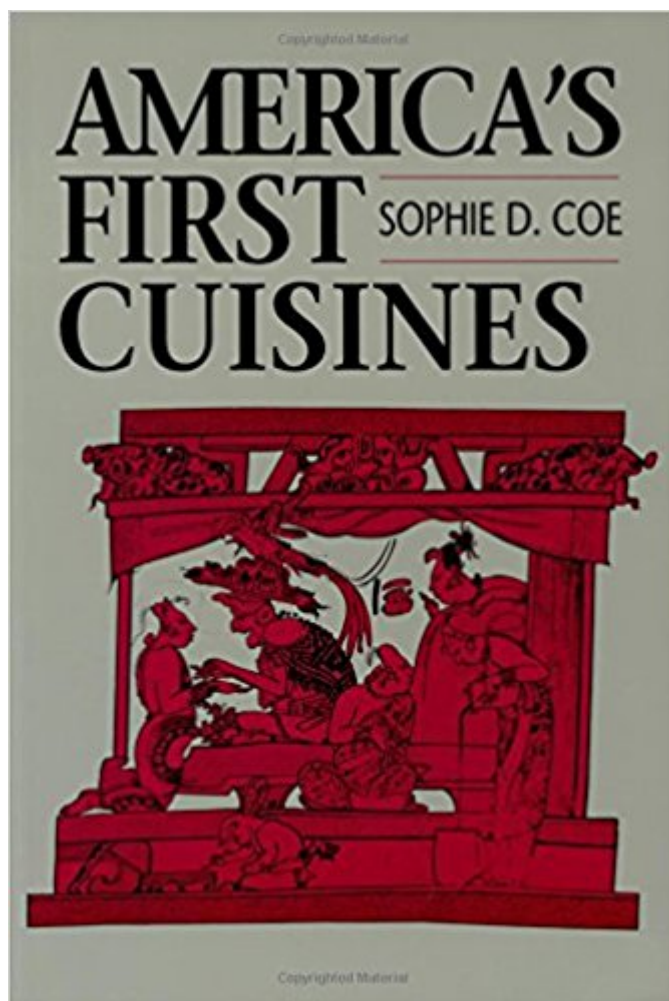


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America's First Cuisines



Synopsis

After long weeks of boring, perhaps spoiled sea rations, one of the first things Spaniards sought in the New World was undoubtedly fresh food. Probably they found the local cuisine strange at first, but soon they were sending American plants and animals around the world, eventually enriching the cuisine of many cultures. Drawing on original accounts by Europeans and native Americans, this pioneering work offers the first detailed description of the cuisines of the Aztecs, the Maya, and the Inca. Sophie Coe begins with the basic foodstuffs, including maize, potatoes, beans, peanuts, squash, avocados, tomatoes, chocolate, and chiles, and explores their early history and domestication. She then describes how these foods were prepared, served, and preserved, giving many insights into the cultural and ritual practices that surrounded eating in these cultures. Coe also points out the similarities and differences among the three cuisines and compares them to Spanish cooking of the period, which, as she usefully reminds us, would seem as foreign to our tastes as the American foods seemed to theirs. Written in easily digested prose, *America's First Cuisines* will appeal to food enthusiasts as well as scholars.

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Customer Reviews

Sophie Coe, anthropologist and culinary historian, gives us a cook's tour of the nuclear areas of New World civilization. Her book is a botanically, zoologically, and nutritionally informed synthesis of information on the New World's contribution to the world's inventory of foodstuffs and, most importantly, on how the use of these foodstuffs coalesced in the culinary cultures of the Aztec,

Maya, and Inca. It is the first work of its kind on the past civilizations of the New World. . . . This book is essential reading for Americanist anthropologists as well as scholars in a variety of other disciplines, and it constitutes serious pleasure reading for lay readers who are cooks, eaters, and students of foodways. (American Anthropologist 1995-09-01) Provides tantalizing snapshots of Native American cuisine and culture, especially at the first intersection with the Europeans. . . . It must not be missed by anyone professing a serious interest in America's cuisines for scientific or gustatory reasons. . . . Appropriate for any interested reader as well as for the academic consumer, this volume presents a wealth of excellent information and is a marvelous read. (Nahua Newsletter 1995-11-01) Hardly anyone who works with food history can afford to skip reading the New World staples and produce chapters, and once started on the book, won't want to stop anyway. Coe's story of the early New World civilizations and their encounters with Europeans is extraordinarily readable, interwoven with descriptions of food, how it was prepared and served, its significance to the people who ate it. Coe treats the New World people respectfully and with dignity, and at times the narrative is unbearably sad as it describes their conquest by the Spanish. (S. L. Oliver Food History News 1994-01-00) Sophie Coe . . . was as rare in our time as her hero, Bernardino Sahagún, was in his: a culinary anthropologist who gave equal weight to both parts of that phrase.... However, despite the strong culinary thrust of the text, the 'discovery' of New World foods is an aspect of her story that—although extensively discussed—becomes, finally, almost beside the point. Her real subject is the tragic collision of two worldviews perhaps least likely to understand, let alone appreciate, each other. If mestizo culture remains as volatile and potent as a vinaigrette, it is because, even today, the two continue to coexist less like water and chocolate than oil and vinegar. (Cook Book 1994-09-00)

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I bought this book because I already owned a copy and wanted to share it with a friend but I didn't want to let my copy out of my sight. The new copy is in very good shape

brilliant overview of indigenous cuisine. i can't recommend this book enough.

So many foods native to north and south America - I want to try them all. The spices used to flavor chocolate sound so appealing.

I was able to read this book steadily from beginning to end, which is unusual for me with a book of historical nature. So often such books are dry recitals of names and dates, interspersed with quotes from a myriad of past authors which sometimes seem to my way of thinking to be almost randomly placed in the text in order to have it be said they were quoted. This book does include quotes with their sources, but they support the text rather than supplant it. The information that I wanted to learn is presented in an orderly fashion, for each of the three cultures. The supporting quotes appear in their appropriate places along with the author's opinion of their possible biases. The text includes factual descriptions that excite the imagination without actually entering the realm of fiction. At the end of the book I felt satisfied. I feel no need to seek another book on this subject. This book also gave me enough general background on cultural cuisines to enable me to evaluate similar books about other ancient cultures. I guess in summary I would have to say that by my perception this author wants to engage the reader's interest in a subject about which she is enthusiastic, and teach the reader accurately what can be learned on that subject. In my case, her book succeeded admirably at both things.

I have interests in cooking and history. This book covers both and in an excellent way. The author's writing style is engaging and entertaining. I felt drawn into the book immediately and have a hard time putting it down. Ms. Coe's insights are funny and the amount of detail presented feels just right. She covers first the foodstuffs unique to the Americas then dives into the specifics for the Aztecs, the Maya, and the Inca. She discusses both pre-European contact and post-European contact cuisines and cultures. It isn't really a recipe book but her descriptions of the food gave me many ideas on how to prepare some of the dishes listed. It is truly a culinary anthropology book but don't let that put you off; it is easy and worthwhile even for us lay-folk. I also have a copy of her book on chocolate and am looking forward to reading that when this one is done. I recommend it if you have any interest in cooking, history, the Americas, or any of the cultures listed.

The list of food products discovered or created by the American Indians seems endless: corn, manioc (cassava, yuca, or tapioca) squash, beans, chocolate, tomatoes, potatoes, peanuts, pineapples, avocados, vanilla, and chile peppers -- plus for your Thanksgiving table, turkey, and for your wicked moments, tobacco, coca, and magic mushrooms. Conversely, there's been very little written about pre-Columbian cuisine. Coe's book fills this lacunae. The Spanish destroyed every aspect of Indian culture they could but enough accounts of Indian food were recorded to partially construct what they ate. Coe focuses on the food of the three main civilizations in the Americas at the time of Columbus: the Aztecs, Mayas, and Incas. A lot more information survived about the food of the Aztecs than the other two. Working with fragmentary information Coe has reconstructed the cuisines of these civilizations -- and rich indeed were the foods they ate -- dozens of variations of tortillas and tamales, a heavy reliance on chiles, innumerable varieties of potatoes, and a huge variety of chocolate dishes that seem ripe for the exploration by culinary adventurers, entrepreneurs, and writers of cook books. The notion, often advanced, that the pre-Columbian diet was boring, primitive, or deficient is refuted persuasively here. The book suffers a bit from being an overly broad summary that left me hungry (groan!!!) for more information about many foods only barely mentioned. There's plenty of material here for additional books and questions to be answered. To echo an earlier reviewer: what did the Italians eat before the tomato and the Irish before the potato? Smallchief

The food and culture around food of the Americas before European arrival. Also fascinating to think about which foods came from where and what was done without that we all the for granted everywhere now.

This book is one of my favorites in recent years. I have become interested in the history of foods and Sophie Coe was an incredible scholar. Her books are great reading and amusing. Unfortunately she is no longer with us but she has left us with two wonderful books on the foods of the Americas (The True History of Chocolate--finished by her husband Michael Coe, another great writer of history. I highly recommend this one as well).

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