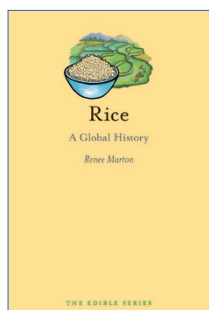


From the marshes to your menu



Rice: A Global History

by Renee Marton

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2014. 128PP. £10.99.

Rice is a major foodstuff on all inhabited continents, and deeply embedded in diverse cuisines from Brazil and Louisiana to Mali, Madagascar, India and Japan. As such the history of rice is as much a story of human voyages, long-distance trade, political ambition and human demography as it is an account of a humble wetland grass and its adaptive radiation. Renee Marton takes on the ambitious challenge of distilling the natural, social and cultural history of this staple crop, today consumed by about two-thirds of the global population, in a mere 128 pages.

Historical anecdotes and evocative descriptions of meals certainly whet the appetite for cooking up, or ordering in, rice for dinner. In broad brush strokes Marton recounts the movement of rice through the ages; its origins in East Asia, its adoption in the Middle East and its transmission via Arab traders to Medieval Europe. European sailors, who did much to move crops around the world, eventually brought Asian rice to sub-Saharan west Africa as well as to the Americas. The uptake of rice in urban markets, and its transformation into products like parboiled 'Uncle Ben's' rice and breakfast cereals, as well as its growing popularity with the expansion of Asian restaurants and supermarket ready meals, is also explored. However, although the book delves into many of the details of rice's story, it also leaves the reader hungry for more details on the various ways in which humans have moved and adapted rice to such a wide range of geographical and cultural environments.

Marton begins by exploring the plant itself, from its early cultivation and nutritional content to the different types of rice we see on our plates today. Unfortunately, the author's account of the domestication and diversification process fails to take advantage of the insights gained from genetic research in rice over the past

20 years¹. In particular, the discovery of a number of additional subtypes, including *tropical* and *temperate japonicas*, *fragrant* varieties and *aus*, is overlooked. Beyond these oversights, the text fails to get beneath the veneer of descriptive events: the reader gets no sense of how the selection for culturally adapted variants, such as fragrant, sticky, black or red rice, has shaped its evolutionary diversification.

Next up is the early history of rice, from its domestication to its arrival in Europe. The role of rice in supporting population growth in ancient China is explored in some depth. The arrival of short-growth-season rice varieties into Song Dynasty China, for instance, marked the beginnings of a green revolution. Unfortunately, Marton overlooks the regional complexities of the process — the gradual domestication of perennial wetland grasses in the Yangtze valley, and their subsequent adaptation to temperate China and to drier ecologies in the mountains of Southeast Asia². The story of the wild rices of India is also passed by. The hybridization of these varieties with Chinese rices, potentially around 4,000 years ago, led to an explosive expansion of agriculture and population growth in India. It was the lowland irrigated forms from India that went on to fuel urban expansion in places like Thailand over the past 2,000 years³. While these stories are missed, other aspects of rice's cross cultural journey are highlighted. Each of these translocations led to new recipes, culinary fusion and diversification, as nicely illustrated by 16 recipes selected from historical cook books the world over. As Marton states "Rice is frequently the white canvas on which culinary cultures are painted."

Marton pays particular attention to the establishment of rice in the Americas, starting in the sixteenth century. Here, traditions of cultivating rice can be traced back to west Africa. Whether initially smuggled by enslaved Africans or intentionally brought over by European settlers, the African rice crop made the tropical lands of the Caribbean and the waterlogged soils of the Lower Mississippi productive enough to support dense populations that then turned their attention to the cultivation of non-subsistence crops like sugar and cotton in less waterlogged soils. The demand for sugar and cotton drove demand for more slaves, and more mouths to feed meant more rice had to be planted.

Later, rice became an export commodity in its own right. Marton explains how the growing demand for rice in European urban centres like London in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries came to be met increasingly by American colonies; Africans with inherited cultures of growing rice were in high demand at the time to ensure high profits for their masters. Today, the rice-based dish gumbo, that came out of Louisiana in the eighteenth century, serves as a clear example of the history of rice in the region; the dish takes its name from the linguistic root for the vegetable okra in the African Bantu languages, and is a melting pot of African, French, Spanish and Italian culinary influences.

The book ends with a lively exploration of the part that rice has played in art and religion around the world. The claim that the tradition of throwing rice at weddings goes back to ancient Egypt or Israel is probably untrue, given that rice was introduced by trade to Egypt only in the Roman era, and Assyrian evidence for rice includes only fleeting mentions in early texts³. Nevertheless, Marton provides an interesting cultural account of rice — how it symbolizes harmony for the Japanese, how the 'iron rice bowl' signalled social security in Maoist China, and how people and cattle share rice cooked in milk to celebrate the harvest in Tamil Nadu, South India.

Overall the book does a nice job of illustrating the long global history of rice and the many ways in which cultures have turned rice into a food and a symbol. It is an accessible source on the past 1,000 years or so of rice history, nicely illustrated with colour photographs of rice meals, tools and historical depictions, from a sixteenth-century Persian sultan receiving rice to an 1866 rice harvest in South Carolina. If you have never really thought much about where the rice you eat comes from, then this book will open your eyes to how global and cross-cultural the story of rice has been, and will offer some alternative recipes by which to try a taste of this history. □

References

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