



### Feeding the People: The Politics of the Potato

By Rebecca Earle

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS: 2020. 306PP. £14.21

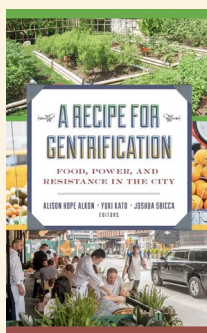
Rebecca Earle traces how and why the potato has fallen in and out of political favour over the past several centuries. The book examines motivations for the state's engagement with the individual's dietary practices, primarily the harmony and tensions of interests between the political elite and the working poor.

In early modern Europe, the potato was 'state-evading'. Grown primarily in marginal grounds by women, difficult to quantify and tax, potatoes were of little interest to the elite. With the Enlightenment, public health and 'vigour of the population' was tangibly linked to the wealth and power of nations. A myriad of public health schemes, from draining marshes to hospital regulation, were pursued for both humanitarian and economic reasons — the health of the population was recognized as its wealth. The high-yielding, easily cultivated, nourishing potato, beloved by children and adults alike, was hailed by Adam Smith and other economic philosophers of the time as a vision of harmony between personal, societal and economic well-being. Besides, diet was seen as a cheap-fix to national prosperity compared to the alternative of economic reform to channel more wealth to the working poor.

In the nineteenth century, the potato came to symbolize challenge to individual autonomy and a tool of exploitation associated with, according to Earle, the "proletarianization and immiseration of the working poor". With the example of the dietary-autonomy potatoes leant the Irish smallholder, a political view prevailed that such self-determinations risked destabilizing the national interest and impeded capitalism. The new science of nutrition, furthermore, showed that the potato was nitrogen and protein poor, and exacerbated micronutrient deficiencies in the population — and the nineteenth century potato fell from political favour.

The potato rose, triumphant, in the twentieth century as war-time strained national food supplies and the state, once again, identified diet with the health of nations. An array of 'politico-diet toolkits' were designed to stave off the political and military consequences of malnutrition. With the establishment of the FAO, World Food Programme and other agencies with the remit of promoting global food security in the post-war era, the importance of the potato was, according to Earle, slow to be recognized — but as 2008 was designated the International Year of the Potato, it looks like the potato is back in favour.

Earle's study of the tensions between the state's interest and the individual's autonomy in nutrition matters has application to many of today's public and planetary health scenarios. The book is of interest to political and social sciences, food historians and more generally. And for potato enthusiasts, it is a treasure-trove of information.



### A Recipe for Gentrification: Food, Power, and Resistance in the City

Edited by Alison Hope Alkon, Yuki Kato and Joshua Sbicca

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS: 2020. 384PP. \$35

Food and gentrification are indeed deeply entangled. In *A Recipe for Gentrification*, the editors, sociologists Alkon, Kato, and Sbicca, argue that examining food retail and food practices is critical to understanding urban development.

The book has a set of diverse contributors, including graduate students, professors, and community activists, and analyses cases of gentrification across the United States and Canada, including cities that have become synonymous with gentrification, such as New York City, Los Angeles, Vancouver, and smaller cities typically ignored by gentrification studies such as Durham, Oklahoma City, and Cleveland.

To understand how urban development affects the economic, cultural, and ecological dimensions of place, the book examines a wide range of food enterprises such as restaurants, grocery stores, community gardens, farmers' markets, and non-profit organizations, as well as developers and city officials. The book investigates the roles of food businesses, urban agriculture, and various community responses to gentrification, and highlights the work of long-term residents and non-profit organizations in the face of gentrification.

This book is insightful, and broadly covers the role that food plays in gentrification. It is a good reference for food systems studies and the general public.



## Meatpacking's Coronavirus Problem

Presented by Tamasin Ford

Podcast from *The Food Chain* (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/w3cszjq7>)

Coronavirus outbreaks in the meatpacking industry have affected many workers around the world. A recent episode from the BBC podcast series *The Food Chain* explains why this is so and explores whether such a dramatic situation could be a wake-up call for change through the eyes of three interviewees: Victoria Bouloubasis, a journalist and film maker who has been reporting on immigrants' lives in North Carolina; James MacDonald, professor of agricultural economics at the University of Maryland; and Lars Hinrichsen, head of the Danish Meat Research Institute.

Many of the world's largest meatpacking industries are based in the USA. Built in the 80s and 90s, they took advantage of abundant cheap labour — mostly due to migration flows from Latin America — to achieve economies of scale. This model still persists, with workers standing side-by-side along the production line. Physical proximity, a refrigerated environment and poor working conditions (including low wages, no paid leave, limited information and straining shifts) have facilitated the spread of COVID-19. Equipment for individual protection such as masks and glasses and temperature checks have been largely adopted, but have not prevented the escalation of the problem.

Yet, as illustrated by Denmark, a different model is possible. High wages have forced the local meatpacking industry to seek alternatives to human labour; over the past 70 years, about half of its budget has been reinvested in business automation. That, we are told, has been positive for both employers (robots are cheaper and can be trained through, for example, artificial intelligence to perform as well as humans) and employees (who now oversee the robots performing their former tasks). As the Danish example also evidences, the shift to more knowledge-intensive, better-quality jobs depends on incentives and collaboration across sectors.

This 28-minute podcast is timely and informative for both academics and non-academics. Going beyond the coronavirus outbreaks, it denounces poor working conditions persistent in the meat industry even in developed countries, and highlights some of the structural changes that must take place to ensure a socially responsible food system.



## Empowering BIPOC Communities by Going Back to the Land

Presented by Indy Srinath

Podcast from *The Mushroom Hour* (<https://www.welcometomushroomhour.com/blogs/podcasts/ep-32-empowering-bipoc-communities-by-going-back-to-the-land-feat-indy-srinath>)

In this episode of *The Mushroom Hour Podcast*, Indy Srinath discusses her experience of using organic farming and permaculture to empower marginalized people to connect with food.

Ethnobiology and ethnoecology are at the heart of Srinath's work. The podcast explores how urban agriculture, foraging, community gardens and social media on organic farms can be used to widen access to agricultural education. Srinath is particularly drawn to connecting black, indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) communities to indigenous agricultural practices — growing crops that are relevant to the growers' background and climate. Issues around land ownership, urban food deserts and redistribution of wealth for restorative justice are discussed, with the emphasis that regional food systems exist within wider power structures.

The podcast highlights how food systems cannot transform without active community participation, and Srinath believes that diversity of experience, background and identity are important aspects of this transformation. Despite covering some challenging material around land rights and dispossession, the tone is uplifting and forward-thinking with an emphasis on empowering people to start growing food in whatever capacity they can. Image credit: ivan folio / Alamy Stock Photo.

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