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# Introduction

*Etta M. Madden and  
Martha L. Finch*

In 1986 the activist Carlo Petrini led a band of protesters armed with bowls of penne pasta in a demonstration against the opening of a McDonald's restaurant on the ancient Piazza di Spagna in Rome. Petrini and his friends represented the Italian organization Arcigola (archgluttony), which was working "to create awareness of local products and awaken people's attention to food and wine and the right way to enjoy them."<sup>1</sup> For Petrini, American fast food represented all that was wrong with the world: homogenization, industrialization, colonization, globalization, dehumanization—in short, McDonaldization.<sup>2</sup> Europeans and North Americans, Petrini argued, had lost touch with their gastronomic roots, with their sources of true pleasure and taste. "Fast-food culture"—its corporate economics, its assembly-line mode of meal production and consumption, its fat- and chemical-laden Big Macs and fries, and the superficial, frenetic lifestyle it promoted—was destroying authentic human life physiologically and aesthetically. That day, on the Spanish Steps in Rome, the Slow Food movement was born.

Slow Food went international in 1989 and by 2004 had grown to more than eighty thousand members in more than one hundred countries, including an American affiliate, Slow Food USA. The organization promotes a global philosophy that is rooted locally in small *convivia*—groups that meet regularly in a member's home or at a restaurant, winery, or farm to learn about "matters of taste." *Convivia* hold "food and wine events and initiatives, creating moments of conviviality, raising the profile of products, and promoting local artisans and wine cellars."<sup>3</sup> As

Slow Food USA puts it in its Guiding Principles, the members want to “cultivate and reinvigorate a sense of community and place,” as well as promote “global collaboration.”<sup>4</sup> The Slow Food Manifesto, approved by delegates to the “International Slow Food Movement for the Defense of and the Right to Pleasure” conference held in Paris in 1989, outlines the organization’s global philosophy. The manifesto rejects “industrial civilization” for it has “enslaved” us to “Fast Life, which disrupts our habits, pervades the privacy of our homes, . . . forces us to eat Fast Foods,” and threatens the environment and humanity itself with extinction. The manifesto defends “quiet material pleasure” as the only effective antidote to “the universal folly of the Fast Life.” Sensory pleasure derives from the “slow, long-lasting enjoyment” experienced when family and friends gather “at the table with Slow Food.” Those hungering for authenticity can “rediscover the flavors and savors of regional cooking and banish the degrading effects of Fast Food,” as well as participate in “virtuous globalization”—an “international exchange of experiences, knowledge, and projects.”<sup>5</sup>

Slow Food has generated an expanding international network of heirloom food producers, distributors, and consumers, among them the likes of the renowned Berkeley chef Alice Waters, and retailer of high-end gourmet products Williams-Sonoma. Among the organization’s numerous projects, a primary one has been building the Ark of Taste, based on The Noah Principle: to “save” the world from the “flood” of the homogenizing excesses of the modern world. Countering McDonald’s official One Taste Worldwide mission, Slow Food celebrates regional uniqueness and global diversity. Into the conceptual ark go endangered species of wild and domesticated plants and animals, endangered artisan techniques of food and drink production, and endangered practices of social civility, conviviality, and commensalism in order to build “a more human and highly developed society.”<sup>6</sup>

The Slow Food movement captures in a nutshell (or a snail shell, since the slow-moving snail is the emblem of the organization) the themes of this volume. Taken together, the essays explore an American “culinary triangle,” to borrow a familiar term from the structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss.<sup>7</sup> Rather than the raw, the cooked, and the

rotted, however, the essays here bring together three central themes that weave their way throughout American culture and history, contributing to a distinctly American ethos: the role played by food and *foodways* within *communities* that hold *utopian* aspirations for bettering themselves or the world at large. Foodways, according to the folklorist Lucy M. Long, include “the network of behaviors, traditions, and beliefs concerning food, and involve all the activities surrounding a food item and its consumption, including the procurement, preservation, preparation, presentation, and performance of that food.”<sup>8</sup> Shared foodways, as the Slow Food movement demonstrates, contribute to the successful construction of any community of like-minded individuals.

However, communities are complicated entities, particularly in our postmodern global society. Reviving “the kitchen and the table as centers of pleasure, culture, and community,” a Slow Food *convivium*’s leisurely, intimate gatherings around food paint a familiar picture of a community as a group of individuals who physically meet, talk, and enjoy the pleasures of eating together.<sup>9</sup> Participants intend these convivial gatherings to connect the grassroots-embodied local community with a diffuse but active global community of members who likely never will meet face to face and sit down to a meal together. Yet they are linked meaningfully not only by participating in an innovative economic system of food production, distribution, preparation, and consumption that spans the globe but also by sharing their ideas, stories, and values about food through print publications and the Internet.

Utopianism, like community, is also a complex notion. The Slow Food movement offers a clear instance of a community with utopian ideals and goals. Petrini claims they are “without nostalgia,” but members want to bring from the past into the present, and from rural locales into industrialized society, an idealized time and place when people grew their own vegetables, made their own cheese, baked their own bread, and sat down with family and friends to enjoy a meal produced and prepared by their own hands.<sup>10</sup> They want to access real or imagined “taste memories” and “rescue” unique regional foods and foodways—the Andean root *yacón*, Indian mustard seed oil, British Somerset cheddar cheese, American heritage turkeys, for example—from extinc-

tion caused by such “evils” as agricultural industrialization and biogenetic modification, typified by fast-food culture. Slow Food is typical of many utopian groups, for it looks to an ideal past in order to promote its distinct vision of a better present and future, one in which human beings are “saved” by learning to slow down, develop taste memories, experience true pleasure, and live authentically, with deeply felt connections to each other and a more humane, “civilized” world.

America has provided an environment particularly conducive to our culinary triangle’s three elements—foodways, communities, and utopianism—coming together in a dynamic generation and exchange of meanings and practices. Especially since the publication of Eric Schlosser’s popular exposé, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (the subtitle of the UK edition is *What the All-American Meal Is Doing to the World*), the global spread of American fast-food restaurants represents to many the displacement of local values and practices by U.S. cultural imperialism.<sup>11</sup> And yet for others, whether in Los Angeles, Rio de Janeiro, or Capetown, consuming a Quarter-pounder with Cheese means symbolically ingesting all they see as positive about the United States: political and religious freedoms, military superiority, educational opportunity, technological advancement, economic power, material luxury, and the abundance of natural resources that have made these possible.<sup>12</sup> This real and imagined American cornucopia of natural and cultural products, symbolized and enacted through American food and foodways, provides the setting for the diverse communities explored in *Eating in Eden: Food and American Utopias*. Yet contradictory interpretations of America—as both a utopian land of abundant resources and possibilities and, because of that abundance, also a fallen nation of consumers who fret over their diets, health, and apparent cultural poverty—complicate meanings of America-as-utopia. In response, communities have developed distinct food practices to promote their own visions of how life should be lived in America.

### **A Brief History of American Abundance**

The seeds of American fast food, the cultural meanings it symbolizes, and the contradictory responses it has elicited were planted more

than five hundred years ago by the earliest European explorers, who exclaimed at their discovery of a marvelous “New World” overflowing with unimaginable riches. From early travel narratives that described in vibrant detail the discovery of exotic new foods, to recent accounts that have presented the United States as “breadbasket to the world,” food has served as a primary symbol of American abundance. Utopian images of America as the land of plenty were shaped by the first explorers, who often used biblical language to rhapsodize about America as a millennial land, the New Jerusalem foretold in the Bible. Christopher Columbus imagined he had found the Garden of Eden and claimed that God had shown him where to find this “new heaven and new earth,” where a richness of natural resources awaited harvesting.<sup>13</sup> Later voyagers promoted American riches to Europeans hungry for economic profit, religious or political freedom, and other opportunities. Captain John Smith described Virginia in 1612: “The mildnesse of the aire, the fertilities of the soile, and the situation of the rivers are so propitious to the nature and use of man as no place is more convenient for pleasure, profit, and man[']s sustenance.”<sup>14</sup>

Other travelers in the 1600s compared the abundance of American commodities with their lack in Europe, claiming that the “savage” Native people they encountered were unable to take full advantage of the land’s riches. Indians simply took what they needed with ease, said these writers, and celebrated with feasts during which they ate “until their bellies stand forth, ready to split with fullness.”<sup>15</sup> Numerous colonial promoters provided long and detailed descriptions of indigenous fruits, fish, and game, hoping to attract more settlers, with technologies supposedly superior to those of “indolent” Native people, to harvest American resources, creating wealth for colonial investors.<sup>16</sup> Many of those who did settle in America believed that they had been led by God out of Europe into the “land of promise” and a “new paradise.” Plymouth’s William Bradford imagined Christ inviting his people in New England to “eat . . . and drink freely” of the banquet of wine, milk, sweet spices, and honey spread before them in the wilderness garden.<sup>17</sup>

Proponents of the myth of American abundance held up both the land and the “New World” societies established there as physically,

morally, and spiritually more healthy and pure than those left behind in Europe. Thomas Jefferson's agrarian ideal for the New Republic was reflected in the "new man," the American farmer, about whom Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur wrote in 1782. In Europe men were "mowed down by want, hunger, and war." In America the "precious soil . . . feeds and clothes us; from it we draw even a great exuberancy, our best meat, our richest drink; the very honey of our bees comes from this privileged spot." In America, Crèvecoeur's imaginary farmer proclaimed, a European immigrant experiences a "sort of resurrection." He "involuntarily loves a country where everything is so lovely," where there is "room for everybody," where "instead of starving, he will be fed."<sup>18</sup> In 1817 the English visitor William Cobbett perpetuated this vision: in America "you are not much pressed to eat and drink, but such an abundance is spread before you . . . that you instantly lose all restraint."<sup>19</sup>

Crèvecoeur and earlier colonists did express some fears about the detrimental physical and moral effects that consuming foods grown in the "savage" American wilderness might have on their "civilized" minds and bodies, and many immigrants, of course, encountered far more hardships than those who glorified American abundance had described.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the glowing rhetoric prevailed. It has shaped the expectations of the millions of immigrants who have arrived here since the early nineteenth century. In the 1800s eastern European Jews, encouraged by letters from relatives and friends who had already participated in the "New Exodus" to the New World, were lured by the "land of milk and honey" and "of mystery, of fantastic experiences, of marvelous transformations."<sup>21</sup> In her study of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Jewish, Italian, and Irish immigrants' foodways, the historian Hasia Diner has noted that pangs of hunger drove the immigrants out of their countries of origin and promises of plenty powerfully drew them to America, "a place where [they] could find work," and work "meant being able to feed oneself and one's family."<sup>22</sup>

Visionary ideals of American abundance continued to shape discourse at the national level throughout the twentieth century. Writing in the 1950s, the historian David M. Potter argued that a primary factor influencing "the American character" was "the unusual plenty of avail-

able goods or other usable wealth which has prevailed in America.” For Potter, the land’s physical resources and political freedoms had generated a “politics of abundance,” which “fused . . . these two ingredients—freedom and abundance— . . . in American democratic thought.” This fusion, in practical terms, meant a higher standard of living, including better nourishment, for Americans than for the rest of the world.<sup>23</sup> More recently, however, Harvey Levenstein has pointed to the cultural revolutions of the 1960s as initiating a “crack” in the “facade” of the American abundance myth as Potter had described it, a crack noticed by proponents of Slow Food. Industrialization of agriculture, biogenetic modification of foods, continuing malnutrition and obesity, and obsessions about health, dieting, and thinness have challenged former meanings of America as the land of plenty, creating the “paradox of a people surrounded by abundance who are unable to enjoy it.”<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, not unlike colonial travel narratives that served up a cornucopia of American fruits, fish, and game to a European readership hungry for the exotic and for profit, it is still primarily food products—now Coca-Cola and McDonald’s restaurants—that serve as the most potent emblems of the inherently conflict-laden myths of American abundance and consumption to the rest of the world.

### **Utopianism, Communities, and Foodways**

Throughout American history visionary ideals of abundance and the paradoxes they have generated have been articulated by communities of like-minded individuals and enacted in those communities’ foodways. We refer to such visionary ideals as “utopian”—a term that extends beyond the religious connotations of Eden and paradise to other discourses of social reform and improvement. Since Thomas More’s *Utopia* was published in 1516, many people have used the term utopia to signify “an imaginative vision of the *telos*, or end, at which social life aims.”<sup>25</sup> More cleverly coined the word utopia from the Greek *eutopia*, which means “good place,” and *outopia*, which means “nowhere.” In their discussions of utopia, scholars often consider two basic types: “fictional” utopias such as More’s—appearing in print as political or philosophical treatises, religious manifestos, or novels—and “commu-

nal” utopias—actual groups of people who live together, sharing property and labor, with the intentional purpose of creating “good places” in specific locales.<sup>26</sup>

For some utopias, this familiar classifying scheme works, but for others, including many of the utopian communities described in this volume, attempting to place them in one of these two categories—either fictional or communal—reveals both the problematic and limiting nature of the classifications.<sup>27</sup> Examples of American fictional utopias abound, but some have transgressed the boundaries of the printed text. Étienne Cabet’s *Voyage to Icaria* (1839), for example, has been called a fictional novel.<sup>28</sup> Yet Cabet’s Icarians existed both in the world of print and as an American communal utopia, in which people shared property and living quarters. Formerly a political leader in France, then exiled and living in England, Cabet imagined Icaria, a community “better” than the country in which he had lived. Through the voices of characters such as Eugene, who writes home to his brother, Cabet described this “good place.” Writing of its food practices, for example, he explained that members of the Republic produce and consume “what is necessary . . . what is useful . . . and what is agreeable.” Likewise, everyone in Icaria has “an equal share of all foods without distinction.” The meals consumed in a common hall “present a great economy,” “induce the masses to fraternize[,] and . . . simplify the housework for women.”<sup>29</sup>

Although Cabet wrote initially for a limited audience, his fictional utopia was a success. Five editions appeared between 1840 and 1848, and its popularity prompted some readers to attempt living according to the pattern Cabet created; believers in Cabet’s vision sailed to America to live out their dreams in Icarian communities established in Texas, Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, and California between 1848 and 1881.<sup>30</sup> Cabet’s Icaria not only makes blatant the values of specific food practices in utopian communities but also demonstrates the difficulties of classifying utopias as either fictional or communal. The Icarians, clearly, were both. Thus, the boundaries between utopias described in writing and those experienced in communal sites are often blurred.<sup>31</sup>

Labeling utopias as one of these two traditional types is problematic not only because of the blurred boundaries between them; it is also lim-

iting when we complicate meanings of “community.” Benedict Anderson asserted many years ago that sharing idealized images, promoted through particular technological innovations and economic relations, creates a community.<sup>32</sup> Thus, limiting utopian communities to communal utopias—consisting of people who, because of common intentions, choose to live communally by sharing living quarters, property, and labor—excludes two kinds of utopian groups. First, these categories do not include those people who hold a common vision and live in close proximity to one another but do not live together “in community,” as do members of communal utopias. However, because their members attempt to achieve shared idealized visions by living near each other and sharing some practices, such as foodways, they *are* utopian communities. We refer to them as “local” utopias. The Puritans in early New England, for example, attempted to establish orderly villages with intentions of fostering moral and spiritual improvement. In the eighteenth century members of the all-male Tuesday Club, influenced by More’s *Utopia*, gathered weekly to discuss the shape of the New Republic. And throughout American history, immigrant groups have arrived with dreams of what America would offer and have established religious and ethnic enclaves in which to share their distinct identities, visions, and experiences.

In addition to excluding these local utopias, another limiting element of previous understandings of utopia arises from Anderson’s claims about communities. While some might only consider as “community” those who live in close proximity to one another, Anderson and many others have acknowledged since his *Imagined Communities* was published that even geographically dispersed individuals can be meaningfully connected by idealized values and practices circulated through various media.<sup>33</sup> Prior categories of utopias have not considered people who might gather with small groups of others to promote their ideals but never meet face to face all the members of their widely dispersed community. We refer to these as “global” utopias.<sup>34</sup> Not only Slow Food USA but also the Weigh Down Workshop, a twelve-week program designed by the Protestant evangelical Gwen Shamblin to improve body and spirit and lead its followers, according to R. Marie Griffith, into

“the Promised Land of thinness,” exemplify this type of utopian community. Begun in 1986, the Weigh Down Workshop is now “the largest devotional diet program, by far, . . . offered in as many as thirty thousand churches, seventy countries, and sixty different denominations.”<sup>35</sup>

Bound by various communication means as well as by practices intended to materialize their visions of perfecting self and society, these new American utopian communities are products of an increasingly globalized culture. In addition to members of Slow Food USA and the Weigh Down Workshop, people who buy cookbooks by celebrity authors, follow vegetarian diets, or view televised cooking shows each share visions of a “good place”—a world where people appreciate the quality of the food produced and consumed, eat foods nutritionally beneficial to them, or want food production and consumption to be environmentally friendly. Such utopian communities fully illustrate the ways in which participants are unified by their idealized visions and practices of foodways, in spite of their diffuse geographic locales.

Adding the categories of “global” and “local” to the more common “fictional” and “communal” utopias acknowledges the ways that the nature of American utopianism and understandings of community have changed over time, and such changes can be demonstrated by a single utopian community. For example, founded by the visionary Joseph Smith and a few family members and friends in central New York in 1830, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah, is today one of the world’s largest religious organizations. Based on what he understood to be divine revelations, Smith established many new practices intended to effect physical and spiritual purity among his followers, including dietary regulations.<sup>36</sup> While some might see Smith’s visions and *The Pearl of Great Price*, in which he described them, as fictional, the group that followed him west from New York was a communal utopia. Over time the LDS Church grew into the locally based but geographically diffuse utopian society it is today, exemplifying the combination of global and local, or “glocalization,” that characterizes recent understandings of the global community.<sup>37</sup>

Scholars include Mormons in studies of American utopias because Latter-day Saints have sustained Smith’s visionary ideals through-

## Contributors

**Jonathan G. Andelson**, professor of anthropology and director of the Center for Prairie Studies at Grinnell College, received his PhD from the University of Michigan in 1974. Andelson's interests include ecology, religion, intentional communities, and, most recently, agriculture and local food systems. Since 1971 Andelson has studied the Amana Colonies and published articles on many aspects of them. He is at work on a book-length study of Amana.

**Priscilla J. Brewer** earned her PhD in American civilization from Brown University in 1987. She is professor of American studies at the University of South Florida. The author of *Shaker Communities, Shaker Lives* (University Press of New England, 1986) and *From Fireplace to Cookstove: Technology and the Domestic Ideal in America* (Syracuse University Press 2000), Brewer is working on a book about student life at American women's colleges.

**Wendy E. Chmielewski** is the George Cooley Curator of the Swarthmore College Peace Collection. Coeditor of *Women in Spiritual and Communitarian Societies in the United States* (Syracuse University Press, 1993), she also has published on women in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century peace movement.

**Trudy Eden** received her PhD from Johns Hopkins University and is assistant professor of history at the University of Northern Iowa. She is the author of a book manuscript, "Equal Fare: Food, Identity and Society;" as well as several articles on the history of food in the Atlantic world.

**Martha L. Finch** received her PhD in American religious history from the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 2000 and is an associate professor of religious studies at Missouri State University. A visiting research fellow in the Center for the Study of Religion at Princeton University (2004-5), she has authored articles on human embodiment in American religion and a book manuscript, "Corporeal Saints: Religion and the Body in Plymouth Colony," for Columbia University Press.

**Etta M. Madden**, author of *Bodies of Life: Shaker Literature and Literacies* (Greenwood, 1998), also has written articles on Puritans, Quakers, and Shakers and on science and literature of the early republic, published in *Early American Literature*, *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers*, and *Communal Societies*. A professor of English and on the gender studies faculty at Missouri State University, she serves as a consultant for *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* and as a reader for *LIT: Literature, Interpretation, Theory*.

**Monica Mak** is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill University. The author of articles published in *Convergence: The Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* and *Yi Shu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, she received the De Grandpré essay prize for “The Pixel Chef: PBS Television Cooking Shows and the Human Sensorium.” Mak is also a documentary filmmaker and has (co)directed and edited several documentaries, including *Canadian Pie: Boys Dressing for the Prom*, the award-winning *Unwanted Images: Gender-Based Violence in the New South Africa*, and *Women Educating for Peace*.

**Kathryn McClymond** received her BA from Harvard University and her PhD in religious studies from the University of California, Santa Barbara. An assistant professor in the Religious Studies Department at Georgia State University, McClymond primarily focuses her studies on Hindu and Jewish ritual traditions, including brahmanical Hindu and biblical and rabbinic Jewish sacrifice. Her recent articles include “Differing Intentions in Vedic and Jewish Sacrifice,” “The Nature and Elements of Sacrifice,” and “Death Be Not Proud: Reevaluating the Role of Killing in Sacrifice.”

**Maria McGrath** is a visiting assistant professor in history at Allegheny College. Her dissertation, “Food for Dissent: A History of Natural and Health Food Politics and Culture since the 1960s,” examines the historical and cultural trajectory of the natural-foods movement from its origins in the 1960s counterculture to its incorporation into early-twenty-first-century mainstream consumer culture. McGrath’s “‘That’s Capitalism, Not a Co-op’: Countercultural Idealism and Business Realism in 1970s U.S. Food Co-ops” appears in *Business and Economic History On-Line* (2004 edition), and her “Spiritual Talk: The Oprah Winfrey Show and the Popularization of the New Age” is forthcoming in the anthology *I’m Every Woman: The Phenomenon of Oprah*.

**Ellen Posman** is assistant professor of religion at Baldwin-Wallace College in Berea, Ohio, where she teaches courses on Judaism, Buddhism, and comparative religion. She specializes in the comparative study of Judaism and Buddhism, particularly on issues of exile and diaspora. She received her BA from Stanford University, her MTS from Harvard University, and her PhD in 2004 from the University of California at Santa Barbara.

**Margaret Puskar-Pasewicz** received her PhD from Indiana University in 2003. She is assistant professor of history at College Misericordia, Dallas, Pennsylvania, where she also teaches a course on food and American society. Recipient of the Upton Prize in Shaker Studies, she is working on a book manuscript titled “‘For the Good of the Whole’: Vegetarianism in the United States, 1817–1918.”

**Mary Rizzo** received her PhD in American studies from the University of Minnesota in 2005 with her dissertation titled “Consuming Class, Buying Identity: Middle-Class Youth Culture, ‘Lower Class’ Style and Consumer Culture, 1945–2000.” She teaches in the Women’s and Gender Studies Department at the College of New Jersey and is working on a book-length study of urban consumer cooperatives in the United States.

**Phillip H. Round** is associate professor of English and American Indian and Native studies at the University of Iowa, where he coordinates the American Indian and Native Studies Program. He is the author of *By Nature and By Custom Cursed: Transatlantic Civil Discourse and New England Cultural Production, 1620–1660* (University Press of New England, 1999).

**Debra Shostak** is professor of English, College of Wooster, and the author of *Philip Roth—Countertexts, Counterlives* (University of South Carolina Press, 2004). Additionally, she has written numerous articles on contemporary American novelists that have appeared in journals such as *Shofar*, *Twentieth Century Literature*, *Arizona Quarterly*, *Contemporary Literature*, and *Modern Fiction Studies*.