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Book Review

Eating Like a Mennonite: Food and Community Across Borders By Marlene Epp MQUP, 2023; 304 pages

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Marlene Epp's *Eating Like a Mennonite: Food and Community Across Borders* is a compelling study of how food mediates cultural, religious, and communal identities. Drawing from personal reflection, Epp reorients the reader's attention from "what" Mennonites ate to what food meant for them throughout their migratory and diverse religious traditions. Epp, as a Mennonite herself, comes to understand that "Mennonite foodways reflected both a hybrid cuisine and a collective social memory that changed over time" (p. 15). Today, over two million Mennonites live across North America, Latin America, Africa, and Asia, shaped by centuries of migration, adaptation, and cultural exchange. Epp complicates the idea of a monolithic Mennonite cuisine and instead argues that food traditions among Mennonites are not fixed but are continually reshaped by historical experience and geographical context.

The book is organized into five chapters, each focussing on a different facet of Mennonite foodways. The opening chapter traces how Mennonite food practices evolved throughout their many migrations. Emerging in 16th-century Europe, Mennonites emphasized adult baptism, which saw them displaced and forced to migrate to protect their religious beliefs and practices. As they migrated across Europe and eventually to North America, Latin America, and beyond, Mennonites participated in food exchanges and their own culinary traditions adapted to local foodways. Epp and other scholars use the term "diaspora" to describe Mennonites because of how frequently they moved throughout their history, and how with each movement they tried to maintain some connection to a homeland. In the absence of a common language and other cultural features, food became the signpost of identity for them.

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Chapter Two focuses on the gendered dimensions of food preparation, emphasizing the historical role of women in preserving and transmitting Mennonite culinary knowledge. Epp argues that Mennonite food practices, and the very idea of what it meant to "eat like a Mennonite", have long been shaped by women. This chapter thoughtfully examines how Mennonite women have used food to shape their identities, respond to expectations, and assert their roles within family and community life. Moreover, cooking functioned as a marker of domestic skill, religious commitment, and communal responsibility. As such, the kitchen as a space could serve as a source of self-worth for some women, while evoking feelings of inadequacy for others.

In Chapter Three, Epp focuses on Mennonite cookbooks, which she argues serve as vital cultural artefacts that reflect community identity and the evolution of food practices. Early Mennonite recipes were shared orally or handwritten, but by the late 20th century, printed cookbooks became tools for cultural preservation, functioning as mediums of collective memory and markers of ethnocultural identity.

Chapter Four addresses the theme of food scarcity, which has been a persistent aspect of Mennonite history from the famines in the Soviet Union to food insecurity in early Canadian and American settlements. Epp treats hunger not only as a material reality but also as a component of collective memory. Stories of survival include resorting to eating cats, dogs, mice, and possibly other humans. Such stories serve as a collective cultural memory to remind Mennonites to be thankful in times of abundance. This chapter further highlights the gendered burden of food provisioning in Mennonite culture, as women were often responsible for ensuring family survival during times of crisis.

The final chapter examines the role of food in shaping religious and communal identity. For Mennonites, food practices are intimately tied to faith, particularly through rituals of gathering and sharing. Potlucks, church meals, and acts of charity were significant aspects of Mennonite culture for their communal aspect. Epp emphasizes that commensality, the act of eating together, reinforces group cohesion and harkened back to a transition where Anabaptists aimed to read and understand the Bible together as a collective because they were disconnected from the larger institution of the Church. Epp also highlights how Mennonite traditions of charity, especially in addressing food insecurity, are rooted in historical experiences of scarcity, and reinforce their collective commitment to community.

In arguing that there is no "single culinary category of Mennonite food" (p. 224), even if the term is widely used by both Mennonites and the broader public, Epp reflects on the broader significance of food to Mennonites. To "eat like a Mennonite" is not to eat a fixed set of dishes, but to engage in evolving practices shaped across historical and geographic contexts with the goal that food is prepared and shared not just for individual sustenance, but for the benefit of family, church, and community. To illustrate this diversity, Epp includes five recipes from Mennonites around the world—spring rolls, zwieback, tamales, prips, and anarsa—foods rooted in various cultures that have all become part of the Mennonite culinary landscape.

In sum, *Eating Like a Mennonite* is a highly accessible contribution to the field that speaks to a general readership. One of the book's key strengths is Epp's ability to weave personal reflection with scholarly analysis to tell a story about the diverse food tradition of over two million people. While rooted in Mennonite studies, its methodology and insights resonate far beyond, offering valuable perspectives for scholars of food studies, religious history, women's and gender studies, and diaspora communities. Although this book is about Mennonite foodways, it speaks to a general

audience because it encourages broader reflection on the relationship between food and identity. It raises questions relevant to any reader: Where do our food traditions come from? How are they passed down, adapted, or abandoned? What cultural values are embedded in what we eat, and how we prepare and share food? In doing so, the book makes a persuasive case for the value of food studies as a means of understanding the cultural and social life of any community and it is a welcome and important addition to the growing literature on food and identity.

Aqeel Ihsan is a PhD History Candidate at York University, specializing in migration and food history. His research interests focus on the South Asian diaspora currently residing in Canada. His doctoral research seeks to conduct a food history of Toronto by placing 'smelly cuisines' at the centre and chronologically tracing the history of the most prominent site where South Asian immigrants could purchase and consume South Asian foodstuffs, the Gerrard India Bazaar.