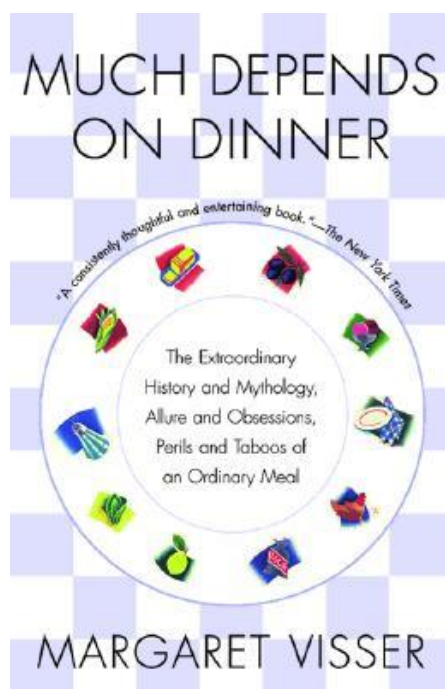




Much Depends on Dinner: The Extraordinary History and Mythology, Allure and Obsessions, Perils and Taboos of an Ordinary Meal

Margaret Visser

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Winning unanimous praise on its publication and now available in paperback from Grove Press, Much Depends on Dinner is a delightful and intelligent history of the food we eat. Presented as a meal, each chapter represents a different course or garnish. Borrowing from Byron's classic poem "Don Juan" for her title ("Since Eve ate apples, much depends on dinner"), writer Margaret Visser looks to the most ordinary American dinner for her subject - corn on the cob with butter and salt, roast chicken with rice, salad dressed in lemon juice and olive oil, and ice cream - submerging herself in the story behind each food. In this indulgent and perceptive guide we hear the history of Corn Flakes, why canned California olives are so unsatisfactory (they're picked green, chemically blackened, then sterilized), and the fact that in Africa, citrus fruit is eaten rind and all. For food lovers of all kinds, this unexpectedly funny and serious book is a treasure of information, shedding light on one of our most favorite pastimes.

Much Depends on Dinner: The Extraordinary History and Mythology, Allure and Obsessions, Perils and Taboos of an Ordinary Meal Details

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From Reader Review Much Depends on Dinner: The Extraordinary History and Mythology, Allure and Obsessions, Perils and Taboos of an Ordinary Meal for online ebook

Joan says

Visser composed a menu for a very simple dinner, then wrote a microhistory for each ingredient on the menu, establishing that even a simple dinner is an anthropological, scientific, and technological miracle. And far too often these days, the miracle may not even be real food.

Anne says

Visser's unusual approach to delving into the history of common foods left me far more informed at the end but also exhausted. She makes up for a lack of grace in writing by stringing together anecdotes, history and facts into long trails that make concentration hard. That being said, I am much more aware of how certain foods take on an important role in our lives and how they acquired the role after reading this book. The sections on olive oil, lemons and ice cream will stay with me. I had no idea about the roots of the ice industry and the dollars earned shipping ice half-way around the world for several centuries. Stories like that one make up for the blizzard of names and dates that often serve to confuse more than enlighten. Overall, a book that sometimes shines, informs with ideas and people and trends I have knew and might have benefited from a more readable style, or even some timelines to help with dates.

Trina says

Full of crazy facts about some of the basic foods we eat every day. For example, chickens were first domesticated for cock fighting- not for eating.

Tim says

Much Depends on Dinner is a remarkable book, that combines history and anthropology over dinner. Beginning with the conceit of analyzing the origins of a simple meal: opening with corn, salt, butter; an entree of chicken and rice; a salad of lettuce, olive oil, and lemon juice; and a dessert of ice cream, she ranges over the history of our eating habits and the results of our food choices, both in history and today. She relates that the results of our choices determine and limit who we are: "We invented them, however, to fill needs: chairs, forks, and hallways were required by the sort of people we have become; having them now prevents us from being different." (11) She does not discuss all foods, instead picking interesting highlights. In the twenty years since her writing some of her topics, like salt, have gotten full length book treatments of their own.

She claims "each of the foodstuffs I have chosen has a weird, passionate, often savage history of its own; each has dragged the human race in its wake, constrained us, enticed us, harried us, and goaded us in its own particular fashion." Using the nine foods she ranges over human history and across human cultures and each chapter ends by focusing on what is done today to bring these foods to our table. "When I began this book I meant it to be primarily amusing; often, however, I wrote it in outrage and in fear." It is absolutely amusing,

filled with fascinating details and odd connections that bring the commonplace to life and remind us of the centrality of corn and salt and dairy products and rice and olive oil to human cultures, and how much we take for granted our current abundance of citrus fruits, fresh vegetables, and sweet and fatty desserts. The book is also filled with the fears of crop uniformity and genetic manipulation, the loss of the past amid production, and the demands of the market next to the demands of the plant and the planet. She is not hectoring, but offers a quietly withering denunciation of factory farming and the environmental tampering that ignores diversity for immediate and efficient production. (20) Listen to her comments on factory farming of chicken and their meaning for our humanity: "The whole flock of barnyard fowl has disappeared from our view, to be locked away, forced to conform to a utilitarian scheme, deprived of as many of their natural behavioural patterns as are thought inconvenient, and pressured ever more relentlessly to produce. Let us hope that the suspicion does not become ever more insistent that once again we might be thrusting upon chickens a role which is a kind of prophetic model, a metaphor for the general direction of present human goals, and for the price we are prepared to pay, and to make others pay, in order to satisfy what we perceive to be our needs." (136) These are exactly the questions that need to be asked, not just about factory farms, but about our human yielding to and shaping by technology in general.

The book opens with an attack on boredom, the "loss of meaning, which in turn comes in part from a failure of religio or connectedness with one another and with our past." This book is a modest plea for the realization that absolutely nothing is intrinsically boring, least of all the everyday, ordinary things" that we require to live. Boredom along with power is a dangerous thing and she finishes her introduction quoting Auden: "The old warnings / still have power to scare me: Hybris comes to / an ugly finish, Irreverence / is a greater oaf than Superstition." (21)

I read this book over time, but it sat too long on my nightstand. Chapters are better taken in all at once and not in small pieces. But that said, most chapters stand quite nicely on their own and the book as a whole does not require you to read it all the way through. It is perfect to make your dinner-time conversation entertaining or to make it serious, whichever you prefer.

Wayne says

"Since Eve ate apples,
Much depends on dinner."
BYRON, "Don Juan"

"WHEN I BEGAN THIS BOOK
I MEANT IT TO BE AMUSING...OFTEN HOWEVER
I WROTE IT IN OUTRAGE AND FEAR."

This rather intriguing statement by the author MARGARET VISSER occurs in the Introduction where she gives us the details of a Four Course Meal comprising NINE foodstuffs, each having a weird, passionate, often savage history of its own which will soon be discussed and dissected.

This 'anthropology of everyday life' is definitely amusing and totally fascinating as Real Life always is.

But Real Life also includes :
farm mechanization and the loss of human livelihoods;
the salting and pollution of desperately precious fertile areas of the earth; cheap meats versus animal rights;
the dangers of genetic engineering, food irradiation, additives, and pesticides.
Hence Margaret's OUTRAGE and FEAR !!!!

Some years ago I read Margaret Visser's
book of short essays "The Way We Are".
These were usually 4-5 pages in length
having titles such as:
Chewing Gum, Taking a Shower, Crossword Puzzles,
Menus, Umbrellas, The Easter Bunny.
They look at familiar customs, objects and behaviour,
all VERY informative, entertaining and interesting.

You were actually seeing the familiar from a totally new perspective.

It was on the strength of this book that I began
(and left unfinished due to work pressures)
"Much Depends On Dinner" which was equally, if not MORE fascinating.

eg. That eating meals is fraught with potential danger!!!
That this comes as a surprise is due to the rituals we unconsciously observe and the table manners invented
to prevent squabbles over "food problems" and "food rights".
People ate with their own knives, sharp pointed ones, as no cutlery was supplied to guests.(Hence our
rudeness about pointing with a knife or fork...dangerous points !!!)
These food squabbles could become violent, and quarrels resulted in stabbings ...and deaths. Laws forbidding
weapons were passed and Knives with rounded ends were supplied to cut down on deaths at supper !!!
We have them still !!!

Now I could be getting this mixed up
with her third book
"The Rituals of Dinner" - The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities and Meaning of Table
Manners".....mmm!!!

...BUT that doesn't matter
because that book was also unfinished
and has to be reread...
and as far as I'm concerned
if YOU are reading this
YOU SHOULD READ ALL OF THESE THREE BOOKS TOO !!!!!!!!!!!

JUMP ABOARD !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

julie says

i found this book very thought-provoking, especially the introduction and i even blogged about it here:
<http://www.julochka.com/2013/11/whats...>

it strikes me as interesting to think of food as an artistic social construct.

"a meal is an artistic social construct, ordering the foodstuffs which comprise it into a complex dramatic
whole, as a play organizes actions and words into component parts such as acts, scenes, speeches, dialogues,

entrances, and exits, all in the sequences designed for them. however humble it may be, a meal has a definite plot, the intention of which is to intrigue, stimulate, and satisfy."

and i like the notion that i am setting the stage and performing a play every evening when i put dinner on the table.

but (you knew there was a but), i found the rest of the book rather dull and heavy to wade through. i'm not sure i buy corn as an appetizer and to have it all overanalyzed took quite a lot of the joy of out it for me.

Marguerite says

A culinary anthropologist and social scientist looks at dinner, with fascinating results. Margaret Visser takes a simple meal and dissects it, molecularly and across history. Her book makes me look at dining differently: "A meal is an artistic social construct, ordering the foodstuffs which comprise it into a complex dramatic whole. ... However humble it may be, a meal has a definite plot, the intention of which is to intrigue, stimulate and satisfy." Despite the book's age (1986), not a lot is dated. Visser was ahead of her time in understanding the science of nutrition and the politics of food production. I put so many sticky flags in this, I felt like I might need my own copy, to mark and consult.

"Subordination, as in the clauses of an English sentence, is still one of our cultural trademarks, in spite of a new tendency to display, in art in order to save time, everything at once on one platter -- a whole meal, even on one TV-dinner tray or airplane dinner package. Equality, plurality, and choice still have to battle with the hierarchies of size and value."

"A North American supermarket is market place, temple, palace, and parade all rolled into one. It is both the expression and the symbol of the goals and the means of North American civilization, physically embodying the culture's yearnings for size, availability, freedom of choice, uniformity, variety, abundance, convenience, cleanliness, speed, and the reduction of hierarchy to quantity: money and amount."

I think the chapters I most enjoyed were the two about salt and butter. (Reading about chickens might put you off your feed.)

I have another book by Visser on my to-read list. I'll move it up.

Kerry says

This is, certainly, a fascinating, well-researched book. But it was difficult to get over the supremely unappetizing "meal" that it is based around. Books about food are supposed to do more than provide information--they are meant to also indulge. The "meal" was like the sad offerings of a cafeteria, and in my imagination, they took on that same pall and glaze that cafeteria food does. Picture in one compartment of your scratched metal tray half of a corn cob--the corn has been boiled too long and sticks in your teeth; in another is the dry, boneless chicken breast, baked to the point of no return, accompanied by some soggy, white, flavorless rice; still in another is a few leaves of yello iceberg lettuce in a pool of lemon juice. For dessert, a little cup of ice cream sits sweating--a layer of crystals coast the top, while the melted-and-refrozen milk and sugar beneath it yield to no spoon. Perhaps the cafeteria is still too fancy for this food--maybe it belongs on a plane, instead.

The perils and taboos of an "ordinary" meal, indeed. No mythology or allure here.

Shannon says

Fascinating, even though I don't like the framework of the book: tracing the history of each component of each course of a multi-course meal. Still, each chapter stands on its own--some five-star chapters others three.

All the things I learned:

I did not realize that corn is not a universal human foodstuff--the English and everyone in the Americas eat it (the latter, on the cob, which almost no one else does); Italians use it for polenta and nowt else; French, only for creatures. Ah, but there's one country in continental Europe where the humans love corn almost as much as new-world-ers: Romania! The Turks let them keep corn because they (the Turks) didn't care for it. They (the Turks) took most everything else.

Then, milk: most people outside northern Europe are lactose intolerant as adults. The lactose content in yogurt and cheeses is much lower because most of the original lactose is processed by the bacteria that produce these foods. So, southern European cooking is oil based (olive), while northern is butter based.

Lynn says

It's hard to imagine now how revolutionary books like this were back when *Much Depends on Dinner* was published in 1986. It was barely conceivable then that someone would write a book, an actual book about something so ordinary as a meal of corn on the cob with butter and salt, chicken, lettuce with olive oil and lemon dressing and ice cream. History was supposed to be reserved for the manly pursuits of war and politics with occasional detours to economy and science.

We are much more comfortable now with the notion that real life (and therefore real history) is about the ordinary and that the mysteries worth exploring are the ones wrapped in dailiness. Way before her time, Visser made the point that "...forms of things are a kind of language, speaking the logos of our culture...". In short, that to truly understand ourselves, we need to understand the things that are so common that we scarcely notice them at all.

Her pioneering work helped open up a floodgate. We have excellent books about *Cod Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World* and *Salt: A World History*, *Chocolate-The True History of Chocolate*, Second Edition and *Olive Oil: From Tree to Table*. There are so many books about the history of wine that there's no place for them in a brief review.

What matters, it seems to me, is that these histories aren't just about the substances being discussed. Can Cod really be said to have a history?

They are instead, about how our interaction with these things has shaped us and our world. For many readers, this represents a great advance over all that stuff about kings and presidents.

Lynn Hoffman, author of *New Short Course in Wine*, The which owes its existence in part to Visser breaking

the trail and to the thoroughly food-filled bang BANG: A Novel.

MEGAN C says

Slightly out of date but fascinating all the same.

Marietje says

Despite minute research, an original approach and great enthusiasm on behalf of the author "Much depends on dinner" suffers from lack of good editing. Instead of clearly separating history, mythology, eating customs and modern production technique it all gets mashed together into an indigestible porridge. I only made it through five chapters before abandoning the book.

Craig says

Before it became fashionable to think about what's on your plate, this author wrote a brilliant, extensively researched book in a trope it's as unforgettable as your phone number. Take the most simple meal you can imagine - one composed of 9 ingredients like salt or butter that you never think about on their own - and explain in depth each element.

Visser uses each ingredient to burrow into its importance to a dizzying number of cultures, to construct a chapter-length world with that ingredient at the epicenter, and to undercover nerdily amazing factoids.

Two of every dozen factoids stick with the reader, and this reader found that with so many facts and cultures, it's tough to read more than a page at a time without being overloaded. Still, when information comes as densely packed as the original slang for Westerners in Japan was "butter-stinkers," 1/4 of Detroit sits on top of abandoned salt mines and the reason our parents threw rice at weddings, it's worth reading even a page at a time.

Marc says

I had to give up on this one even though it's our current book club selection. I found it had some interesting facts, but they are too few and far between the extensive historical and dull descriptives ...too many books I WANT to read to waste more time on this one. I felt like I was reading a text book and there was going to be an exam...

I agree with one reader - she jumps all over the place so it's a struggle to follow ... I often found my mind wandering to other things (grocery lists) and having to re-read what I had already read multiple times.

I highly recommend this book to anyone who suffers from insomnia. This book is sure to have you fast asleep in no time...hopefully not dreaming about corn, salt or any of the other subjects in this book.

I don't know what my co-worker was thinking when she chose this book for our book club (does she despise us that much?). She has read many of this author's other works so she knows what she's in for.

I commend one of our club members who did manage to finish the book though with same issues, finding book very disjointed and dry, dense. I'm not sure how many other club members will finish it though. I highly doubt anyone else will.

Unfortunately, I'll never know the history or facts about lettuce, oil, lemon and ice cream (one of my favorite treats) but I think I can live with that.

Honor says

Some people have sometimes said I think about things too much... Analyze them too much, over-think them, look for so much deeper layers and meanings and cause and effect than there need be in any given thing.

I can certainly see the Zen beauty in seeing each thing of and for itself, without looking deeper or demanding more from it... But - and, incidentally, not exclusive to that point of view, I think - I also see tremendous value and take great pleasure in knowing -nothing- is simply what it is. There is -always- more to it than that... And I always want to know.

In "Much Depends on Dinner" Margaret Visser takes the concise subject of a very plain and simple meal and lays out a feast of multi-layered in-dept information such as I've rarely seen prepared on any given subject. It's truly an almost stupifyingly fantastic experience for someone like myself.

A hypothetical meal of corn with salt and butter, chicken and rice, a simple lettuce salad with olive oil and lemon juice, and ice cream is prepared for a small hypothetical dinner party with friends.

From that simple beginning, Visser delves deep... Bone deep and beyond, in each of these component subjects.

Thirty-two pages on corn, it's history, it's production, it's uses, and it's pervasiveness in all we eat and do...

Twenty-seven pages on salt. Thirty-two pages on butter (and margarine / oleo). When you're done with each section, you know more than any of your friends on the subject at hand. I wish I had books that covered - everything- with such loving care and thoroughness. :-)

Such an in-depth discussion of any given subject, of course, could easily be as entertaining and engaging as stereo instructions, with even the most interested writing. The difference, of course, that makes this book such a treasure is that Visser weaves each sectional essay in such a way that it remains entirely engaging and entertaining. Captivating.

If Margaret Visser chose to spend the rest of her life writing just this sort of thing about... Well, anything she chose... I'd not only buy and read every word of it, I'd be deeply thankful for the chance.
