

International Commission for Research into European Food History

A Feast of the Senses: European Food and History, 18th-20th century

Scientific Report

ICREFH's mission is to study the history of food and nutrition in Europe since the late eighteenth century. Scholars from European countries and beyond are invited to participate in a relaxed atmosphere in which discussion is the main objective. All papers are circulated prior to the meeting so that delegates can have an early overview of the topic and they are requested to stay for the full conference. With 20-25 colleagues involved it is possible to get to know everyone, something that is impossible in the large academic conferences that are common now. The ICREFH books that follow are not conference proceedings in the traditional sense but rather volumes made up of chapters carefully selected from the papers given. Most of these volumes have come out with commercial publishers and they are in English in order to assure the greatest possible reach.

The recent Symposium at Albi, France, from 3rd to 6th September 2019, was held on the thirtieth anniversary of ICREFH. It represented a departure from the economic and social history approach to food that had been dominant since the first symposium in Munster in 1989. Here for the first time was an emphasis upon the senses, with some papers using cultural insights and some post-colonial. Narrative histories were present and other papers relied upon the social constructionism that has been current throughout the social sciences and humanities for some time now.

We found that thinking about the senses is far from straightforward in a historical setting. With a broad range of source materials it may be possible to pick up direct or indirect references to sight, smell and taste but other senses such as hearing and touch are less easy to find as sensual memories. Delegates in Albi called upon sources as various as newspaper advertisements, cookery books, family histories, travellers' tales, almanacs, and tin can labels. Inevitably this led to discussion about methodology, whether these sources are accurate and reliable, and the best means of extracting representative data.

It was interesting to note that in discussion we agreed that the senses could be brought forward even more, and this will be a key theme in the revision of papers. In addition, most papers were focused on one country, for practical reasons of the time and expense of research crossing borders. The shortage of comparative history in ICREFH symposia continues to disappoint. Delegates come from many countries and have the time to discuss joint enterprises but the problem remains of lack of funding for this kind of work.

The Symposium started with four papers on 'Food Senses and Globalization'. The second day was devoted to 'Words, Describing the Senses' (three papers) and 'Cheese and the Senses' (two papers), the latter session followed by a degustation led by Xaviet Thuret, who in 2007 was the Meilleur Ouvrier de France, Fromagerie. On the third day six papers were grouped under the heading 'Nationhood and the Senses', and on the final morning there were two presentations on 'Industrializing the Senses'. There was also a well-attended evening lecture by Jean-Pierre Poulain that was open to the public. His subject was 'De l'almanach des gourmands à Master Chef'.

The Albi Symposium had a good number of young researchers, three independent scholars, and a healthy representation from Eastern and Southern Europe. The next meeting will be in Rome in September 2021 when the topic will be 'Eating on the Move, 19th-21st Centuries.' Readers

interested in participating are invited to look at the ICREFH website (<https://icrefh.hypotheses.org/>) or read the ICREFH Newsletter (please request inclusion on the mailing list by sending a message to icrefh@gmail.com).