

The Sophie Coe Prize in Food History

Sophie Coe Prize 2020 - Judges' Report

This year, we had the largest number of entries in the history of the Sophie Coe Prize: the three judges reviewed seventy essays. The Sophie Coe Prize is given to work that breaks new ground offering insights into the intersection of food and culture through essays that display creativity and originality.

The winning essay is “**The Viennese Cuisine before Hitler—One Cuisine in the use of Two Nations**” by Susanne Belovari. It is notable for many reasons. While this essay is ostensibly about the Jewish contribution to the recipes in *Wiener Küche* by Adolf Franz and Olga Hess (she wrote it, he edited it), the definitive pre-War Viennese cookbook, this cookbook was shared by Vienna’s Jewish and Christian communities, or “nations” to use Belovari’s language. It was thus, by definition, a book that seemed to speak to shared values, shared humanity, and a shared vision. On a technical level, one of the reasons we selected this essay for this year’s Sophie Coe Prize is the thoroughness, elegance, and originality of Belovari’s analysis of *Wiener Küche*, and the earlier books she studied to establish context. But, this is not a mere study of cookbooks.

Belovari offers a profound and disturbing view of the strengths and limitations of cross-cultural exchanges. This work is ultimately about the power and limits of hyphenated identities. Despite the fact that the Jews and the Christians in Vienna both shared a single cuisine, and according to Belovari that this cuisine was fundamentally structured around Jewish culinary traditions, including those dictated by the requirements of Kosher kitchens, this was not enough to save the Jewish community from total destruction at the hands of its Christian neighbours.

It is one of the strengths of Belovari’s work that she does not directly address that story. Instead, she lets her story of *Wiener Küche* tell the much larger, more universal, story of human tribalism, with its periods of tolerance and attendant cross-cultural exchanges, punctuated by periods of rampant violence, intolerance, and expulsion.

Belovari’s essay, twenty years in the making, emerges from its long gestation as a powerful work of culinary history, an extraordinary example of how the study of food can pose fundamental questions about the workings of the human heart.

The judges would also like to call attention to Belovari’s use of notes. The notes are extensive, much more detailed than usual, enabling Belovari to keep her narrative clean while at the same time sharing the depth and subtlety of her underlying research.

The judges would like to acknowledge a few others of this year’s essays.

An area of culinary history that is poorly covered is the foods of the powerless. The judges read two important essays, Markéta Slavková’s “**Starving Srebrenica and the Recipes for Survival in the Bosnian War (1992-1995)**” and Ayfer Erkul’s “**Food refusal as a protest tool. Hunger strikes in Belgian prisons during the interwar period.**” Both of these works rely on research that is not available online. They both address areas in culinary history that are rarely discussed. The judges encourage more works of this kind.

There were two unusually strong papers on ancient Egyptian foodways that demonstrate the power of archaeobotany and experimental archaeology to solve basic questions of culinary history. While Adeline Bats’ “**The Production of Bread in Conical Moulds at the Beginning of the Middle Kingdom. The Contribution of Experimental Archaeology**” and Mennat-Allah El Dorry’s “**Forbidden, Sprouted, Stewed: An Archaeobotanical and Historical Overview of Fava Beans in Ancient Egypt**” both focus on Egypt, the methodologies used by the authors can be

applied to any time period and any culture. Both archaeobotany and experimental archaeology are relatively new fields. The study of texts can only take the field of culinary history so far. The judges wish to acknowledge these two exceedingly strong papers and to encourage more research in this vein.

Within the group of more traditional essays on culinary history, the judges would like to call out the following papers. Each of these works, in their own ways, bring valuable insights to their studies. They were each a pleasure to read: Rebecca Earle's "**Potatoes and the pursuit of Happiness**"; Vicky Hayward's "**“And in the morning the cook... shall go to his kitchen”**”; Juan Altamiras' ***New Art of Cookery, and its Defining Influence on Modern Spanish Cooking***”; Fanny Louvier's "**Maid in the Kitchen: Female Domestic Servants and Food Businesses in France, 1900-1939**”; Helen Pfeifer's "**The Gulper and the Slurper: a Lexicon of Mistakes to Avoid While Eating with Ottoman Gentlemen**”; and Simon Werrett's "**Physics and Fruitcakes: Food Thrift and Experiment in the Early Modern**".

We congratulate all of them.

12th July, 2020