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Nadeau's New Book Explains Why *Food Matters*

May 17, 2016

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Why do we eat what we eat and why does that matter?

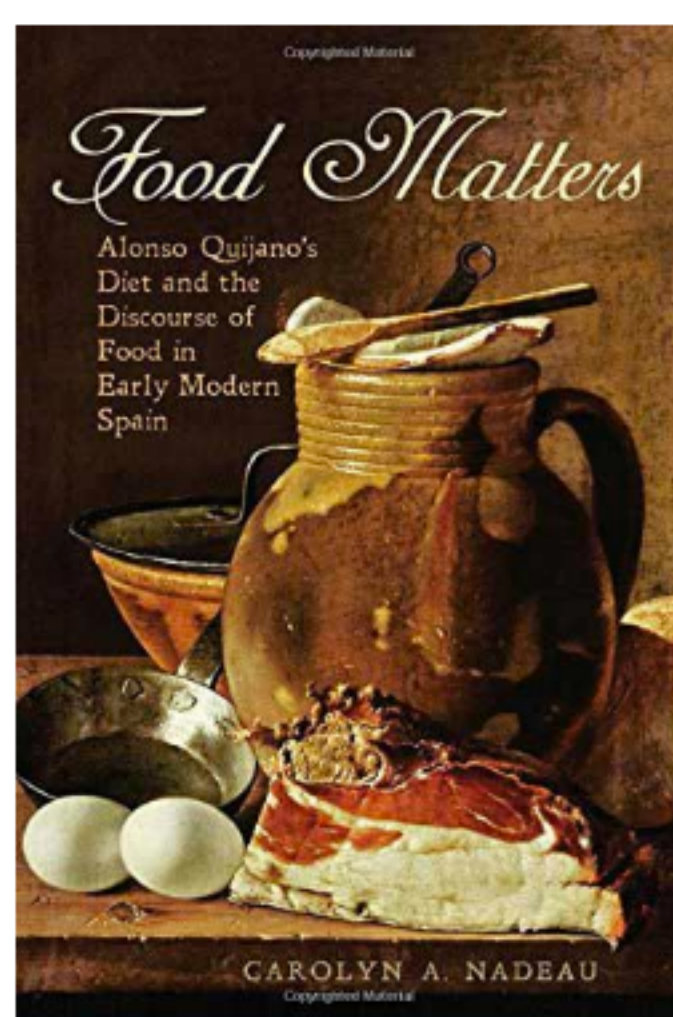
Much more than the biological need to fuel our bodies, food's function shapes culture, history, politics and economy, according to Illinois Wesleyan University's Carolyn A. Nadeau. Her new book *Food Matters* (University of Toronto Press, 2016) utilizes the literary classic *Don Quixote* to explore shifts in Spain's cultural and gastronomic history.

Using cooking manuals, novels, poems, dietary treatises, and other texts, Nadeau brings to light the figurative significance of foodstuffs and culinary practices in early modern Spain. The period was a time when "Spain's Hapsburg empire dominated the world landscape and then lost that position, a time when the country produced dozens of literary and visual artists that are still recognized for their creative genius, a time when the country, like others in Europe, experienced a gastronomic revolution with dramatic changes in the foodstuffs and methods of preparation," writes Nadeau, the Byron S. Tucci Professor and professor of [Hispanic Studies](#) at Illinois Wesleyan.

"The book combines my interest in how authors represent food in different types of literary works with my love of Cervantes' novel *Don Quixote*," she explained. As a literary critic, Nadeau said she is fascinated with monographs and essays that have shed light on significant food practices in the works of European writers.



Carolyn Nadeau says, "I write with a smile but also with firm conviction that all writers play with their food."



"In literature, writers describe images of food that, in turn, define characters and regions...and offer a fixed social identity to readers," she writes. For example, in the second sentence of *Don Quixote*, protagonist Alonso Quijano is defined by the food he eats: "A stew made of more beef than mutton, cold salad on most nights, abstinence eggs on Saturdays, lentils on Fridays, and an additional squab on Sundays consumed three quarters of his income."

Nadeau calls the sentence "arguably the most discussed phrase of food imagery in the early modern period" and uses it to provide the structure for her book. She said the phrase "distinguishes midday meals from those taken at night. It accentuates the religious mores that guided a country's eating habits and sought to unify Spain under one religion....[the description of Quijano's weekly meals] recalls Spain's history of multifaiths that, although it ended in the expulsion of both Jews and Muslims, demonstrates the vestiges of both in Spain's culinary heritage," Nadeau writes.

Spain's cultural heritage is deeply indebted to both its Jewish and Muslim roots, she said. In spite of the efforts of the Catholic monarchs and Hapsburg dynasty to extinguish all traces of either, Jewish and Muslim food traditions continued.

For example, in early modern cookbooks one finds recipes for non-dairy milk substitutes in meat dishes, a possible acknowledgement of the Jewish dietary laws forbidding the simultaneous consumption of meat and milk, according to Nadeau. Other recipes included "Morisco-style" in the title, a clear reference to Muslims who forcibly converted to Christianity. But also important were dietary restrictions that both Jews and Muslims recognized, with ham as a key example, she said.

"In the early modern period, the less Jewish or Muslim one wanted to appear, the more pork that person might consume," she said. "Ham continues to be a defining feature of Spanish cuisine today."

Nadeau hopes the book shows how food functions within literature to enrich a given work. "I write with a smile but also with firm conviction that all writers play with their food and that these actions reveal much more about Spain's culture and history than what is on the plate," Nadeau writes. "The puns and carefully crafted food metaphors enrich readers' engagement with both the written and the performed texts."

She also hopes the book gives scholars and students alike a culinary perspective on questions of identities, whether those are social, class, gender, ethnic or another sort. "I hope that when people read the book, they reconsider how food defines us," she said.

During her research for *Food Matters*, which occurred over several years, Nadeau rediscovered the cookbook of Francisco Martínez Montañón, chef to both King Philip III and IV of Spain. That fascination with Martínez Montañón resulted in the first critical analysis and translation of his manual, the most recognized Spanish cookbook before the 20th century. She received a National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship and a grant from the American Philosophical Society in support of that project.

Nadeau joined the faculty at Illinois Wesleyan in 1994, the same year she earned a doctorate from Pennsylvania State University, and has directed off-campus studies in London, Madrid and Barcelona. She has chaired the Hispanic Studies department and received the University's highest teaching award, the then-named *Pantagraph* Award for Teaching Excellence, in 2003. A scholar of 16th- and 17th-century Spanish literature, Nadeau was named the Byron S. Tucci Professor in 2010. She is also the author of *Women of the Prologue: Imitation, Myth, and Magic in Don Quixote I* and a critical edition of Francisco de Quevedo's *El Buscón*.



Professor Nadeau discusses her research on the role of food in *Don Quixote* and in early modern Spain.