

Review of:

Food and Power: A Culinary Ethnography of Israel

Nir Avieli. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018. Pp. 274, index.

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In *Food and Power: A Culinary Ethnography of Israel*, Nir Avieli underscores power relationships related to food in Israel. The current volume spans over twenty years of data collection and includes observations of various levels of insider intimacy—ranging from the Israeli anthropologist’s ethnographic practices in his home country to more personal autobiographical materials. Avieli is transparent about how his analysis of collected materials is complicated by his status as an “insider” to the culture. At times this status is helpful, because it gives him access to communities that otherwise would be inaccessible. As presented especially in Chapter 5, “Meat and Masculinity in a Military Prison,” Avieli’s status as a military reservist stationed at Mediggo gave him unique access to the prison environment. At other times, though, Avieli’s insider status obstructs analysis of his ethnographic data, as seen in the tense dynamic Avieli finds between his role as reservist and role as PhD candidate. Situations where Avieli acts the most “outsider,” such as in Chapter 6, “Thai Migrant Workers and the Dog-Eating Myth,” reveal power dynamics more clearly and effectively.

This book importantly underscores the delicate and often difficult balance of writing about communities in which one is a member. While focus varies, overall the chapters emphasize power dynamics related to food. Some are thematically linked: Chapters 1, “Size Matters,” and 3, “Why We Like Italian Food,” both orient around the theme of food value for instance. Where Chapter 1 focuses on Israeli desires to eat large quantities of inexpensive food in order to get the most value for money, in Chapter 3, Avieli complicates his analysis of food value, arguing that eating Italian food makes Israelis feel more like members of the Mediterranean community (framed as positive), rather than members of the Middle Eastern community (framed as negative). Avieli’s community insider status in both chapters helps him to highlight a stereotype about Israelis’ relationships to food, and then reveal deeper cultural anxieties below its surface. This repetition and complication of theme is important for readers to understand, though it would have been more apparent if the two chapters appeared in succession, rather than being separated by Chapter 2, on “Roasting Meat.”

“Roasting Meat” concerns Israeli Independence Day barbeque parties and power dynamics associated with “saving one’s space” in public parks. It also makes a connection between meat and masculinity. Because women and children typically eat cheaper meats compared to men, who enjoy more expensive ones, Avieli infers a subtle privileging of masculinity in Israeli society.

The author revisits the connection of food to masculinity in Chapter 5, “Meat and Masculinity in a Military Prison.” Here power reversals among Palestinian prisoners, military police, and reserve soldiers at a military prison are exemplified through the quality and quantity of meat eaten at meals. This chapter most clearly highlights the delicate balance of status that a researcher needs to navigate, especially when one is both an insider (a reservist) and outsider (non-Muslim and non-prisoner) to the community which is the subject of study. Chapter 5 is particularly useful for researchers as an illustration of how difficulties can arise in ethnographic work when the ethnographer is personally invested in the community that is the subject of study.

The final two communities discussed in Avieli’s book emphasize the importance of hierarchy in Israeli society. Chapter 4, “McDonaldization of the Kibbutz Dining Room,” concentrates on dining room power relationships, including where one eats and with whom. Chapter 6, “Thai Migrant Workers and the Dog-Eating Myth,” focuses on the erroneous belief that Thai migrant workers eat dogs, a belief that supports the stereotype of Thai workers as “uncivilized.” This stereotype justifies putting the Thai immigrant population on the lowest rung of the social order, a common practice in Israel with each new immigrant group. Avieli’s juxtaposition of Chapters 4 and 6 provides an interesting contrast in approaches and analyses between the purely insider perspective he represents as a former member of one of the kibbutz under study and the purely outsider perspective he brings to researching new Thai immigrants.

Although there are inconsistencies in the quality of analysis Avieli could achieve because of essential differences in practicing ethnography as an insider or outsider, overall *Food and Power: A Culinary Ethnography of Israel* is well researched and argued. It is useful for folklorists interested in analyzing how specific foods can highlight issues of identity and power in society, and especially useful for students as a well-researched source of further readings. Most importantly, the book affirms the delicate balance that researchers must maintain to negotiate insider/outsider status when writing about communities where they are members: where insider status can give access yet hinder analysis. Avieli’s book reveals not only power dynamics associated with what we eat, but also how we, as a community member or as an outsider researcher within it, use food to establish our “place” in society.