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**Richard Wile and Livia Barbosa. *Rice and Beans: A Unique Dish in a Hundred Places*.
London, New York: Berg. 2012.**

Rice and Beans, true to the claim on the back of the book, is about “the paradox of local and global.” The simple dish of beans and rice, available in innumerable varieties throughout the Americas, powerfully illustrates the difficulty of separating local cultural identity from the larger global and historical forces that have shaped it. Each chapter in the edited volume focuses on a different geographic area in the Americas and the specific form that the rice and bean combination takes in that location. Additionally, each chapter includes a local recipe, sometimes from a family member (like the recipe for “Margarita’s Congri”—the Cuban iteration of the dish, which has been passed down for many generations in the author’s mother-in-law’s family) or from a local “expert.” As such, the recipes are often inexact and colloquial, and therefore provide a delightful glimpse into the kitchens, the ultimate local spaces, where these dishes are prepared and enjoyed.

While rice and beans represents an absolute expression of local culture across the places investigated, the presence and pervasiveness of the dish cannot be isolated from the economic and cultural forces of globalization. A variety of legumes are native to the Americas; as such, the presence of certain domesticates in the fields and on the dinner plates (or breakfast plates, in the case of Costa Rica) of many households in this region is partially easily explainable. However, the widespread presence of rice in this everyday cuisine is a different story. Certainly, appropriate conditions for rice production exist throughout Middle and South America; however, it seems that the rice half of the rice and beans combination was often, though not always, imported rather than produced locally.

Each author, as charged, examines the social, political, historical, and economic forces that gave rise to unique iterations of “rice and beans” or “beans and rice” or “beans and peas” or “cookup rice” as the “national” dish in each of the areas investigated. Some commonalities mostly thread their way across all areas included. For example, the dish (particularly the rice portion), regardless of where it is enjoyed, typically has historical origins in the slave trade. The most common rice variety used likely originated in Western Africa and was most often transported to the Americas via the slave trade. From there, in many of the regions investigated, slaves or, in some cases, indentured servants, produced rice in subsistence plots of land given to them by their owners. (Rice was produced in “provisional” gardens in Jamaica—chapter 4; once it was introduced in Brazil, the Portuguese strongly encouraged its production as it expanded its colony—chapter 7; and in Costa Rica, slaves were responsible for local cultivation—chapter 10).

Another common theme weaving its way across the various areas that enjoy this dish is its appeal across classes, races, ethnicities, ages, and other often dividing social forces. In the introductory chapter, the editors state that “in comparison to a plethora of new foods that separate people by class, gender, age, and income, rice and beans tends to bring people together, as the food of everyone”. While most authors validate this point, it’s particularly powerfully illustrated in chapter 3, “The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same: Rice and Beans in Modern Cuba” by Anna Cristina Pertierra. Prior to the Cuban Revolution, rice and beans was a dish mostly eaten and enjoyed by lower class or poorer Cuban citizens. With the revolution and the collapse of the Soviet Union (a major source of food and agricultural technology), rice and beans became, by necessity, a dish eaten by all Cubans regardless of class, race, or location because of its “enduring qualities,” which included the ingredients’ ability to

survive shipping, distributing, and long-term storage. Further, the low cost of these ingredients (when not grown for free in family gardens) made them accessible to a large population during a significant economic crisis, truly making rice and beans into “the food of everyone.” Often, the local label given to the dish reveals its power as a unifying force: In Cuba, the dish is colloquially called “*moros y cristianos*,” which literally means “Moors and Christians” and alludes to the near equal racial divide of blacks and whites that enjoy the dish (chapter 3). Similarly, in Brazil, not only do the black beans and white rice represent racial mixing, but the rice is also seen as “dry,” while the beans are seen as “wet,” representing the interdependence between Brazil’s rainy Amazon region and its dry arid northeastern regions (chapter 6). In Guyana (chapter 8), and Panama (chapter 9), countries with tremendous racial and ethnic diversity, the dish, again, bridges cultural divides. In the former, a common name for the dish, “*douglapoti*,” reflects the prevalence of racial mixing within the country (“*douglapoti*” being the local term for individuals of mixed descent). Likewise, in Panama, regardless of race, ethnicity, or class, come Sunday afternoon, most households will be enjoying some “rice and peas” around the family dinner table.

Overall, I found this edited volume to be interesting, delightful, and most definitely appetite-inducing. It is clear, after reading all of the submissions, that if I am ever to enjoy an authentic version of “rice and beans” (and the version from Guyana sounds particularly interesting to me) that my best bet is to find a woman like Michelle, a native of Guyana, who contributed her version of “cookup rice” to the edition. Michelle exemplifies many of the volume’s recipe contributors: She is a hard-working and resourceful mother, whose cooking skills (and rice and beans recipe) resulted from multi-generational training in the family kitchen. This text illustrates the ways in which a seemingly simple plate of food can demonstrate the difficulty of separating local cultural identity from the larger global and historical forces that have shaped it. Quite consistently, the dish, across all spaces explored in the text, clearly and powerfully embodied “home” and “family” and, as such, is a near perfect expression of local culture, one that has maintained its strength even amidst the Western trend towards cheap, convenient, and processed food.

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