

History of food: thinking of Lucy



Thinking of Lucy is not easy at 35 000 feet during an unhealthy meal of red meat and red wine while the health conscious executive in the next seat drinks water, eats steamed vegetables, saves an apple for dessert, and savours a non-descript piece of white

fish or fowl. But then the first Lucy, *Homo erectus*, lived some two million years ago in what first became and later unbecame Peking, stood five feet tall, and ate mainly venison (*Sinomegaceros pachyosteus*) but also boar, buffalo, rhinoceros, and tiger. The modern Lucy, by contrast, eats vegetables and Slim-fast, recycles garbage, donates blood, spits on furs, and worries about the ozone layer. Between these two Lucys were many others.

First, some 75 000 years BC, came the larger brained sapiens that hunted, fished,

and discovered how to roast pig or mammoth as reported by an eye witness called Charles Lamb. Without knowing about muscle glycogen and lactic acid Lucy also found out that animals killed at rest tasted better than those chased around Neanderthal Common. As the glaciers withdrew came the Neolithic revolution, during 10 000-3000 BC, flowing with milk and honey, also with bread and cheese, as Lucy took up farming and stock-breeding. Then a few more millennia of culinary history went by and we come to pâté de foie gras, nouvelle cuisine, cholesterol, nitrites, and monosodium glutamate.

All this is covered in Reay Tannahill's *Food in History*, a 1973 Penguin that tells about lead poisoning in Rome from sweetened wines, ergotism from rye contaminated by fungus, scurvy in the British navy, lactase deficiency in the Chinese (who therefore do not put milk in their tea), the discovery of vitamins, the story of wine since 3000 BC, and the use of pepper for "feminine disorders" or for reviving the victims of suffocation. Honey was the main sweetener before sugar, and salt was precious as shown by some

drawing a salary and others being the salt of the earth.

Ms Tannahill also explains why among religions some animals became "clean" and others "unclean." Drinking blood was abhorrent to the Hebrews but popular with the Mongols, who opened the veins of their horses while riding them. Rules against breaking wind in public, found in many cultures, were frequently inconsistent with a staple diet of beans, cabbage, onions, and garlic. Food markets, in the middle ages, were often the source of dreadful epidemics. We also read that in the fourteenth century there were eight million sheep in England, three times as many as people; that potatoes were banned in Burgundy in 1619 because "too frequent use of them caused leprosy"; and that the physicians at Salerno recommended a health diet based on the four humours that would allow Lucy to look younger and live longer—perhaps as long as Adam, who is said to have lived 930 years, a dream still being pursued by many modern Lucys.—GEORGE DUNEA, attending physician, Cook County Hospital, Chicago, USA