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Introduction



Food Culture in the Society of Jesus: Sources, Practices, Perspectives

Danielle Terrazas Williams

University of Leeds, School of History, Leeds, UK

Corresponding author

D.TerrazasWilliams@leeds.ac.uk

Claudio Ferlan

Bruno Kessler Foundation, Italian-German Historical Institute, Trento, Italy

ferlan@fbk.eu

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Few are the archival entries one must read through before Jesuits first mention food. The quantity, the quality, the variety, or lack thereof—all received some degree of attention by the missionaries whose journeys led them to global tables with a variety of hosts with whom to break bread. After maritime perils and exhaustive expeditions on foot, the platters could be achingly sparse or exceedingly unidentifiable. We can imagine the relief, and perhaps elation, European Jesuits experienced at the mere sight of wheat bread while evangelizing in the Americas or throughout Asia and Africa. They would not have been the exception. Chronicles describe vivid tales of their experience with crystalline waters, well-prepared meats, and sweet treats right alongside periods of privation so disorienting that such entries become monotonous as days

became weeks with limited caloric intake and even less hope for improvement as weeks became months. Such was life in a Catholic mission.

This basic necessity shaped the options and the choices of Jesuits near and far. Should a professed house, residence, or college be built? Could the community be sustained? What type of fare (and in what quantity?) would boarders enjoy? When, where, and how should Jesuits convene to break for mealtimes and with whom? Would traveling missionaries have enough supplies to fulfill their fourth vow and papal mandate? Who could have helped them organize their daily lives? The people they were sent to help? The sisters of a women's religious order? These questions center on the quotidian considerations of Jesuits in the world, but sources on food can foster much more. From the mundane to the profane, the history of food in Jesuit sources can open up new perspectives for a wide spectrum of fields, including those not interested in the history of religion. Travel reports expand discussions of cultural accommodation and exchange but also the history of nutrition and medicine. House account ledgers can illuminate financial concerns of the Society and of the greater economic hardships of a region. The development and maintenance of infrastructure depended on access to clean water, crops, and livestock but also local and regional trade and commerce. An array of political tensions and priorities can be examined through Jesuit sources that recorded their decisions to harvest, store, and ration.

Such subfields of history are well-known, as are the approaches to social, cultural, political, and economic history. However, we need not remain so traditional in our exploration of the past. As offered by the scholars herein, researchers should also engage with multiple methodological approaches to history by examining paintings and exploring the symbolic value of objects. We also encourage researchers to survey Jesuit archives to identify and analyze the linguistic bridges that needed to be built as new foods were introduced to European missionaries. For example, Italians offered the appellation of "brodo indiano" or "Indian broth" to the silky and spicy chocolate beverage from Mexico. Sometimes fascinating linguistic allyships arose as Europeans tried to decide on the word for such products of global exchange. The English more closely sided with the Spanish in naming the precious pineapple (*piña real* or "royal pinecone"), whereas the French (*ananas*) and the Portuguese (*ananás*) offered a united front for this South American product. The variety of cross-referencing and interdisciplinary work possible for researchers is enviable. These rich intellectual opportunities inspired this special issue. We hope that as you engage with these articles, you consider additional scholarly avenues available through sources that document the joys and challenges presented by food.

Sustenance and Community-Building

A core “macro” perspective for research is the social dimension of food. This approach emphasizes how food functions not only as sustenance but also as a fundamental element in shaping human interactions, cultural practices, and social organization. Shared meals have historically served as occasions for community bonding, religious rituals, and social gatherings. The communal act of eating together reinforces relationships and social hierarchies, while also reflecting broader cultural values. Among Jesuits, food provided a language of fellowship that they enjoyed with one another and with external communities, including neophytes, secular boarders, and suppliers of various backgrounds.

With the sensitivity of an archivist, Maria Macchi’s contribution features the archival traces for well-appointed banquets and picnics hosted by the Society that entertained the senses and supported delineated spaces of revelry. Such food-related activities extended beyond mere consumption. The processes of cooking together, as well as obtaining food through hunting, trade, and other means, fostered cooperation and shared experiences. As Macchi notes, refectories served as important spaces where collective dining took place, further reinforcing social ties. Examining these practices provides insight into the ways food operated as a medium for communication, conveying identity, status, and tradition.

Food also structured time. Meal schedules, fasting periods, and feasting days helped regulate daily life and seasonal rhythms, influencing both individual routines and collective societal organization. Understanding these temporal structures allows for a deeper appreciation of how food serves as a foundational element in shaping human societies.

As Jesuits ventured further afield, food could build trust, as Molly Borowitz notes in her essay. It also facilitated the circulation of various types of knowledge as Jesuits and burgeoning Catholic flocks shared information about different modes of preparation, acquired new culinary technologies, cultivated foreign fruits and vegetables, and hunted unfamiliar prey. Food served as a dynamic path to learn about oneself and others by offering novel experiences and developing conviviality in sometimes quite dire circumstances. By exploring food from this social perspective, scholars can gain a broader understanding of its significance beyond nutrition, considering its role in fostering relationships, maintaining traditions, and organizing time within different cultural contexts.

However, not all such culinary exchanges could be easily translatable or even palatable for the Society’s global missionaries. Was fasting the same for Catholics as it was for Buddhist clergy? Could Jesuits see shark fins in China

and cuy meat in Peru as merely alternative sources of protein? What of rumors of cannibalism? This special issue's collection of essays provides a spectrum of those experiences. Jesuit strategies of accommodation guided these encounters, but uncertainty remained. In the case of colonial Peru, Borowitz illuminates the challenges of discernment, noting that Jesuits had to "determine where exactly cookery stopped and idolatry began."

Importantly, European ideas of empire and civilization often drove how Jesuits determined these lines and the degree to which they felt compelled to engage in foreign food practices. As Ute Wallenböck argues in her contribution, "travel narrations also used food to infer temperament, wealth, status, civility, and power dynamics." We can imagine Jesuits asking themselves and one another if it was politically expedient to indulge in an Asian delicacy. Was it diplomatically feasible to outright question any lingering Indigenous connotations? Was confronting or consuming such fare worth the risk? These answers varied across time and place, as is explored in the essays, but what is clear is that Jesuits understood that there was something more at stake than the meal at hand.

Eating and Wellness

Access to medicine and an awareness of hygiene were critical facts of missionary life. Macchi's article surveys food experiences in European colleges and residences in the post-Restoration era and reminds us of the centrality of the role of lay brothers in acquiring and administering food as part of restorative treatments. In addition to taste and availability, they thoughtfully considered the importance of nutrition and its impact on community wellness. The efforts of both brothers and fathers to mobilize food as medicine were sometimes challenged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries due to war and rationing. However, early modern records, including travel journals, royal reports, and medical books, have long bound the intellectual histories of food and medicine. Jesuits also documented how plants, herbs, and other consumables (however noxious) helped to bolster diminishing appetites for ailing members and eased the seasickness of those challenged with the unforgiving waves of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

Jesuits often had no other choice but to turn to new concepts of medicine. As Claudio Ferlan asserts, Native American tribes offered critical provisions to Jesuits but also the practice of cooking meat with medicinal roots whose benefits were widely recognized. "Food therapy," as argued by Antonio De Caro and Claire Zhenxu Fan's essay, was a common Chinese framework in diagnosing

and treating illnesses. In Danielle Terrazas Williams's previously published piece, seventeenth-century Jesuits nearly begged superiors general to access Mexican chocolate to cure their "aches and pains."¹ Not all such requests would be granted, but ideas about food as medicine oriented how and when Jesuits engaged with foreign products in the frontier zones of Christendom.

Importantly, as De Caro and Fan emphasize in their article, while Jesuits experimented with new culinary options, "European missionaries were also eager to find "Western" and "European" flavors and food they craved and dearly missed." Among the veritable "food deserts," Jesuits' missions, schools, and colleges (and even members of other Christian denominations) could offer an oasis of familiarity during prolonged scarcity. Jesuits were not traders per se, but, as the articles do well to outline, trade shaped the experience of mission and made the difference in how long Jesuits could persist when so far away from their communities.

Deprivation and Excess: a Lingering Duality

The theme of deprivation offers an important avenue for research within the broader study of food. Deprivation can take both voluntary and involuntary forms, each with distinct social, cultural, and historical implications. One particularly relevant area of study is fasting, a practice found in many religious and philosophical traditions. As a form of voluntary deprivation, fasting serves purposes beyond mere abstention from food; it is often associated with spiritual purification, self-discipline, and social or political statements. Investigating fasting across different societies and historical periods provides insight into its role in shaping individual and collective identities.

In contrast, involuntary deprivation—manifested in famine and hunger—raises questions about economic structures, environmental factors, and social inequalities. The study of famine extends beyond food scarcity to encompass issues of governance, resource distribution, and resilience in the face of crisis. Given its profound impact on societies throughout history, famine warrants careful examination alongside other food-related phenomena.

Hunger united the accounts of global travelers from the early modern period to the nineteenth century. Claudio Ferlan describes just how critical their plight was, writing, "Water was a major problem: hunters often drank foul, stale water, exposing themselves to the great danger of serious infections."

¹ Danielle Terrazas Williams, "The Inconvenience of Chocolate: Disciplining the Society of Jesus in Seventeenth-Century Mexico," *History of Religions* 60, no. 4 (May 2021): 325–57.

Often underfunded and faced with unanticipated conditions in foreign lands, Jesuits chronicled the costs. One such member of the Society made sure to establish his commitment to the mission even though he evangelized “with an empty stomach and with my whole body as cold as ice.” Over and over, Jesuits persevered to fulfill their pastoral obligations, or, at least so they claimed. Beyond the near-anthropological descriptions of other cultures and their foodways, what else is revealed in these narratives? How were tales of food used to reinscribe ideals of sanctity and sacrifice? And, more broadly, how can we mobilize new methodological approaches for food studies to expand, deepen, or complicate what we know about the Society of Jesus and the secular worlds within which they evangelized?

A complementary approach to deprivation is the study of its opposite: excess. Just as fasting and hunger reveal societal values and constraints, overindulgence—particularly gluttony—sheds light on cultural attitudes toward consumption, pleasure, and moral boundaries. Extensively common in Jesuit records are guidelines that urged members to avoid foodstuffs, including notes on abstaining from cuisines considered too piquant for the community. The notion of gluttony was not limited to immoderate eating but also extended to drinking, with drunkenness often carrying similar moral and social connotations. Examining historical and cultural perceptions of overindulgence allows for a deeper understanding of how societies regulated behavior and assigned meaning to acts of consumption.

By considering deprivation and excess in tandem, scholars can study the ways in which food is deeply embedded in systems of morality, identity, and social order. This dual perspective highlights the complexities of human interaction with food, revealing it to be a powerful cultural force.

Looking Forward

In nearly every culture, food and drink have meant more than the mere physical nourishment of the body. That is not particularly revelatory, but the essays here punctuate the avenues that food can take in Jesuit studies and encourage non-Jesuit specialists to turn to Jesuit sources to enhance a wide variety of historical studies. Bountiful archives await scholars interested in the histories of medicine and other healing practices, the persistence and adaptation of non-Catholic religious practices, “crime” and punishment, diplomatic relations, political economy, and technological innovation.

We acknowledge the limitations of the Jesuit sources—they are practically all Eurocentric. However, the experiences of marginalized groups, including

Indigenous people and women, can still be effectively mined. As intimated by Ferlan and noted by Macchi, the centrality of women to Catholic mission can also be found through food. Scholars of women's history have long mobilized the lens of hospitality to delve into how women and girls served in but also reimagined kitchens as areas of care and fellowship. By focusing on how Jesuits remembered, relayed, and understood these gendered encounters with food may help deepen our understanding of women's active roles in the development of a global Catholic Church. Importantly, women's contributions to mess halls and cookery could also become sites of subversion and rebellion. In the already mentioned 2021 article on chocolate, Terrazas Williams connected some of the concerns about chocolate consumption among the Jesuits in colonial Mexico to fears of women and witchcraft, ensorcelled food, and sexuality. In the preliminary examination of women in the annual reports, more broadly, intriguing cases of anxiety and opportunity demonstrate that Jesuits were aware of the varied implications of one's proximity to women's work as purveyors and carers. Women's studies can be advanced through Jesuit studies, and we look forward to seeing how future scholars mobilize food to explore this history.

A final field of study that could flourish by intersecting with Jesuit studies is the history of emotions. As Wollenböck argues, the history of Jesuits and food was one filled with "visceral reactions of both delight and distaste." The letters of these missionaries are rife with embodiment as thirst and hunger ravaged their bodies and depressed their minds. The desperation is sometimes palpable as is the deep religiosity connected to faith in providence. "All for the greater glory of God," a Jesuit would affirm through tears of gratitude, sorrow, and hunger pangs.

Food has energized the field and can continue to serve as a critical lens for Jesuit studies. Importantly, food history has its own chronology, which helps connect the specificity of the Jesuit experience with people, places, and knowing both well before the Society's founding and well after. The capaciousness of the field allows us to gather to discuss joy, conviviality, experimentation, adversities, and, of course, faith. We hope that this special issue helps underscore some of the developing historiographical debates in food studies, offers greater context for Catholic mission history, and contributes to methodological conversations about how Jesuit studies can be valuable to all.