

Portugal, Poland, and a dozen other countries. Those discoveries compelled me to write this book.

This book explores New England's culinary myths and reality through some of New England's most famous foods: baked beans, brown bread, clams, cod and lobsters, "northern" cornbread, Vermont cheese, apples, cranberries, maple syrup, pies, and New England boiled dinner, also known as Yankee pot roast. Each of these foods is frequently featured in popular articles about the history of New England food accompanied by false and sometimes downright bizarre tales—that apprentices were fed lobster until they revolted, that Wampanoag chefs cooked beans with maple syrup, that Pilgrim women roasted turkeys for the first Thanksgiving, that New England's fishermen are heroes battling the elements for food, and that the soil on individual farms makes a discernible difference in the taste of Vermont cheese.

In a period spanning roughly 1870 to 1920, the idea of New England food was carefully constructed in magazines, newspapers, cookbooks, and cooking schools, largely by white middle- and upper-class women who were uninterested in if not outright hostile to New England's immigrant and working-class cooks. Today's New England residents are still struggling with this mythical legacy that has stunted and stymied culinary innovation in the region for more than a century and obscured New Englanders' real struggles with food, resources, racism, and history.

These foods' history confounds their current-day reputations. New England's fishermen have been depicted in films and novels like *Captains Courageous* as strong, independent souls who battle the elements for sustenance—but New England's colonial fisheries depended on sales to slave plantations in the Caribbean. Far from being a beloved treat, maple syrup was unpopular until sugar became scarce during the Civil War, and cornmeal breads were generally abandoned as soon as the Erie Canal started shipping cheap wheat from upstate New York. Lobster is a symbol of Maine only because it has been extirpated in Connecticut and along most of the Massachusetts coast. No one roasts chestnuts over an open fire because all but a handful of American chestnut trees died of chestnut blight almost a century ago.² Boston baked beans and steamed brown bread were invented by molasses-smitten Victorians, not thrifty colonial cooks, and the "Pilgrim" traditions for Thanksgiving were largely invented by a novelist in the 1890s.

Because the category of New England regional food as described in chatty cookbooks and on perky tourist websites relies heavily on the Victorian ideal of New England, New England's supposed foodways are unique in America's regional food lists because they exclude the foods cooked by people who actually live here. New England's traditional foods all have origin stories that show that they have been passed down to the modern day straight from the Pilgrims. Most of New England's most famous foods were supposed to have been gifts of the Wampanoag, especially Thanksgiving edibles—corn, pumpkin pie, cranberry sauce. Even foods that can't be linked to Thanksgiving—baked beans, lobster—are explained as the gift of some kindly Native American. These pretty stories are repeated even when there is no evidence that these foods even existed before the late nineteenth century, as is the case with sweetened baked beans.³

Outside of New England, most beloved regional cuisines are poured from the American melting pot. Tex-Mex cuisine is thoroughly American, mixing beef from British cattle with Mexican-bred chilis and oozing yellow “processed cheese food” straight from the laboratory. New Orleans cuisine has been influenced by just about anyone who has set foot in the city over the past 400 years: rich French-speaking snobs, poor French-speaking Cajuns, African slaves, Cajuns, Spanish, Italians, Haitians—everyone. Southern food is a salmagundi of European, African, and American techniques and ingredients, largely perfected by African American cooks.⁴ North Carolinians savor barbecued pork, not the venison eaten by the pre-Columbian Cherokee.⁵ Minnesota hot dish was conceived out of the union of canned vegetables and canned soup, a duo made possible only by the combined labor of thousands of native-born and immigrant peoples to build factories, lay track for railroads, and drive trucks to factories, cocreating a national industrial supply chain. What could be more American than that?

By contrast, New England's foodstuffs are static, superannuated antiques. When writers talk about New England food, they tend to repeat tales of friendly Native Americans welcoming Europeans with their beloved food, building a new nation on a foundation of generosity, charity, and fortitude. Yet New England's European settlers seem to have adopted as few dishes as possible from their Native American hosts. Pumpkin, corn, and beans made the cut, as did venison and chestnuts. The Pilgrims' descendants had less use for acorns, groundnuts, Jerusalem artichokes, and purslane.⁶ Two genera-

tions after the landing at Plymouth Rock, the descendants of these friendly folk were decimated in the bloody, desperate King Philip's War, a conflict inflamed by the Pilgrims' descendants' obnoxious habit of letting their loose pigs devour the Wampanoags' subsistence crops.⁷

In reality, past and present New England food has always emerged from a mix of cultures. Although all of the colonies founded in the seventeenth century on the East Coast were first populated by English immigrants, by 1700 their food cultures had started to diverge, partly due to what foods were available and how they were prepared, and partly due to who lived where. For example, New Englanders in Boston ate less wild game than their compatriots in New York and the Chesapeake Bay and ate more baked goods and pies—sensible meals for a climate where hot ovens were a household comfort, not a curse, and where most wild game had already been exterminated from nearby woods.⁸

New England stretches from the borders of Quebec to the New York City suburbs, from the shores of Lake Champlain to the Atlantic Ocean. It encompasses both sea-level cities and lofty Mount Washington. Farmers grow turnips on hillsides, tomatoes in greenhouses, and salmon in aquaculture pools. The region has some of the most densely populated areas in the country, like Somerville, Massachusetts, ranked sixth in the United States in 2016, with approximately 19,738 people per square mile.⁹ It also has some of the emptiest: Pisacataquis County, Maine, has just 4.4 people per square mile.¹⁰ New England's residents range from the many Algonkin-speaking peoples whose families have lived in the region for up to 10,000 years to immigrants from Ireland, Poland, Korea, and Africa; roughly 7,000 Somali Americans live in Lewiston, Maine.¹¹

There is a complicated, dynamic, exciting story to be told about New England's food and the future of a diverse and growing region. This book dispels the accumulated myths about who collected, concocted, grew, and digested New England's food so that we can see the culinary past, and the future, more clearly.