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# Adam Maurizio's History of Plant Food (Chastanet)

From PlantUse English

## Adam Maurizio's History of Plant Food: A Resource for Today

Monique Chastanet<sup>[1]</sup>, February 2022

Book review of: Dr Adam MAURIZIO, *Histoire de l'alimentation végétale. Depuis la Préhistoire jusqu'à nos jours*, translated from German into French by Ferdinand GIDON, Introduction and commentary by Michel CHAUVET, Preface by Claude AUBERT, Paris, Ulmer, 2019 (facsimile of the French edition, Payot, 1932), Collection "Vieilles Racines et Jeunes Pousses", 688 p.

*This review is published with the agreement of the journal Histoire & Sociétés Rurales, in which it was originally printed in French (2020/1, 53, p. 171-176 (HAL-SHS (<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-02915854v1>)). Cozette Griffin-Kremer translated the text into English. Additional information and bibliographical references appear in the notes – and in brackets – in the English version. Illustrations have also been added for this translation.*

The re-edition of this book, which could only be found in libraries, is to be welcomed. Adam Maurizio's text has remained a reference work as an essay in the global history of vegetable foods, in spite of some aspects that have become out-dated. The Introduction and Annexes for the new edition, written by the agronomist and ethno-botanist Michel Chauvet, enable the reader to see the work in its historical context. Maurizio's innovative project was nonetheless too demanding for a single researcher to undertake, which led him to make certain thematic and geographical choices. These limits do not call into question his contribution to the analysis of food cultures. Nor do they deny its resonance with present-day preoccupations: interest in cuisine based on cereal grain, vegetables and leguminous plants, the concern with rediscovering a biodiversity eroded by industrial agriculture, and the environmental stakes involved in producing plant and animal resources.

The choice of publishing a commentated facsimile was the only one possible. Otherwise, it would have been necessary to rewrite the book completely with corrections and updating. Hence, this edition utilizes the 1932 French translation of the 1927 German edition, which was revised and enlarged from the 1926 edition in Polish (published as a reprint in 2017). As for Maurizio's other books, it was not translated into English. The historian François Sigaut pointed out the errors that occurred in the French edition from the German text. M. Chauvet, who worked on both versions as well as the Polish, notes these problems in his Introduction and Annex. The 1932 edition was preceded by a presentation in French: A. Maurizio [sic], « Histoire de l'alimentation végétale chez l'Homme », *Revue de botanique appliquée et d'agriculture coloniale*, 1931, 115, p. 159-168. His study particularly concerns Central and Eastern Europe, as well as Scandinavia and Western Europe, with examples from outside these areas. This work is based on Maurizio's reading, personal contacts, and field inquiries into practices that have disappeared today. The text had 82 figures that were either original or borrowed from other authors.

It is worth casting a glance at Maurizio's (1862-1941) education and scientific trajectory. He was a Swiss national who spent his youth in Poland – in Kraków (Cracow) where his father emigrated in 1850 and where

Maurizio was born – and Switzerland, where he studied. In 1894, he defended his botanical dissertation at the University of Bern, and in 1896, became research assistant in plant physiology near Zurich, then in botany in Zurich itself. In 1907, he became professor of botany and plant technology in Lvov, today Lviv in the Ukraine but at that time in Poland. In 1927, he was appointed to the Department of Pharmacy of Warsaw and lived there until 1935, when he returned to Switzerland. His family history – they came from the trilingual canton of Grisons (Graubünden) – and his own career undoubtedly underwrote the European breadth and language abilities shown in his work. Although he mainly published in German, he also spoke Polish, French, English, etc., as we can see in the “Extracts from [his] bibliography” (“Extraits de [sa] bibliographie”) established by M. Chauvet from the footnotes of the 1932 edition (2019, Annex 3, some titles are translated and commented). He began studying cereal grains in the early 1900s before widening his research to the whole of plant foods. His interest in gathering practices may have been influenced by his education in Switzerland which he mentions several times, where food gathering supplemented the insufficient resources of mountain agriculture and stockbreeding [2]. Even more broadly, he enriched his approach as a naturalist with contributions from archaeology, ethnography, history and linguistics. This book was the culmination of his work and brought him international renown.

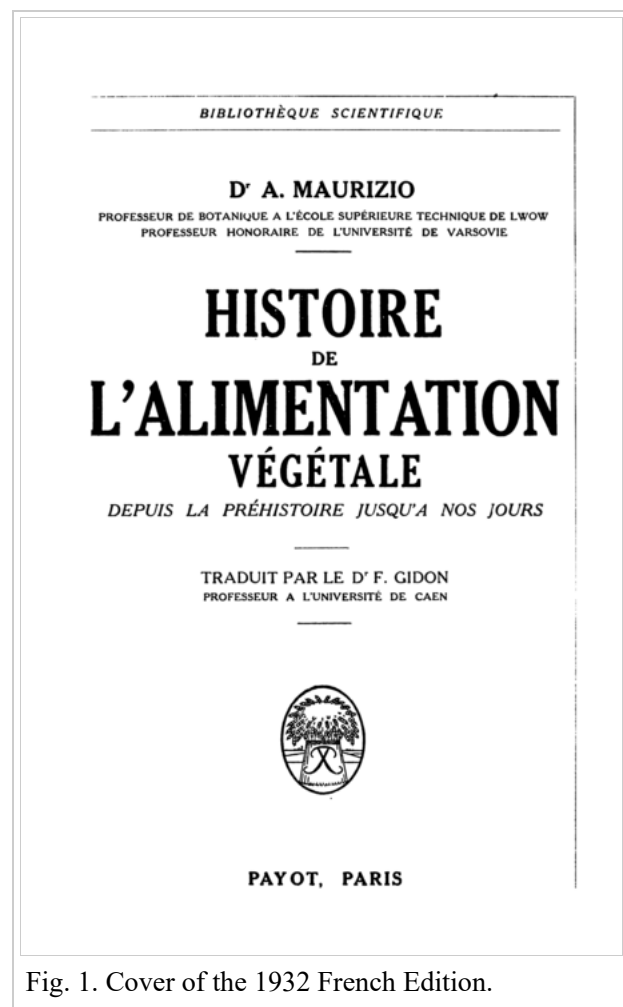


Fig. 1. Cover of the 1932 French Edition.

Maurizio provides an inventory of food species that M. Chauvet puts in an historical perspective between applied botany publications from the early 20th century and recent work, such as that of the FAO, Slow Food or the many studies carried out on local terroir products. Without forgetting M. Chauvet's *Encyclopédie des plantes alimentaires* (Belin Publishing, 2018) and the collaborative website Pl@ntUse, which he created. This re-edition of Maurizio's book is available there with the agreement of Ulmer Publishing and is accompanied by an update on species names, whether cultivated or not, indicated in the table “Plantes de ramassage” [“Gathered plants”] and in the Index. He notes around 700 “wild” species utilized in times of food shortage or dearth. Today, we speak more of the varying status of food plants, some eaten in times of need, others lying along a continuum among wild and cultivated species. This selection of mainly European vegetables reflects his concern with periods of food scarcity and famine that affected the continent.

These crisis periods “gave rise to survivals in habits and often showed there were returns to the past with consumption of bark and leaves, for example” (A. Maurizio, 1931, p. 165). All the while set within the evolutionist conception of history dominant at the time, which led from the “primitives” to the “civilized”, Maurizio does not have a strictly linear perception. What is more, his text is a goldmine of information on plant foods such as lichen, moss and roots used by Northern peoples, which can be eaten fresh but also dried or put up in “sour preserves” or “sauerkrauts” (2019, p. 43-44) [3]. Maurizio minutely describes these ancient strategies against hunger right up to the substitutes European countries had recourse to during the First World War. If societies affected by food scarcity try to remain faithful to their usual foodways, the seriousness of a food crisis subsequently wipes out the differences “between peoples of diverse civilizations” (2019, p. 168). He

compares this famine behaviour to similar observations from other areas of the world, thus rehabilitating the know-how associated with gathered foods and defending a critical vision of “progress” that led, in his opinion, to a pauperization in food resources (A. Maurizio, 1931, p. 168). In this, he has a very similar attitude to today’s concerns. However M. Chauvet adds nuance to this idea by referring to recent plant domestications linked to urban growth, mainly in tropical countries.

Maurizio also elaborated an inventory and classification of foodstuffs that often gives rise to problems of translation and terminology, recalling the remarks by F. Sigaut who called for establishing reference terms in the field of food technology linked to the analysis of *chaînes opératoires* [4]. If this hope was not fulfilled, it is doubtless because this taxonomy is more difficult to develop than in life sciences, considering individual researchers’ practices, regional traditions and agro-alimentary norms. Also, this is perceived as less necessary, since people continue to use local names with their own definitions – with all the risks of confusion and misunderstanding they involve.

As one example of this complexity, let us take that of *crêpes* and *galettes*, the preparation of which varies from place to place and period to period in France. If we limit ourselves to cereal-grain *crêpes* and *galettes*, they may be different in their thickness and the way they are cooked, in a pan or in the oven, or they may be the same thickness, in fact quite thin, while being made from wheat or buckwheat flour. In this case, they are highly varied: salty or sweet, fermented or not, not to mention all the other ingredients that can be added (milk, eggs, cider, potatoes, etc.) or the cooking oil or fat (butter or walnut oil). To really see into this diversity, we must turn to vernacular terms while explaining them through written sources and enquiries. Maurizio must not have been familiar with the cuisines of Normandy, Brittany or Limousin... His Index has twenty entries under *galettes*, according to their “ancientness”, composition or geography. Among them, the *galettes (crêpes) de sarrasin* [sic] in fact refer, with an entry entitled *crêpes de sarrasin*, to a note by the French translator who remarks on their “common use” on farms and at fairs in Normandy (2019, p. 505-506) [5]. The “Russian blinis” have an Index entry, although they are described in the text as *galettes*, with recipes and times when they are eaten (2019, p. 464). But without any trace of the North American “pancakes”, doubtless of German origin. In his commentary, M. Chauvet notes other shortcomings and ambiguities, due to the vast scope of the project.

*Bouillies* (mushes or porridges) and breads are really the strong point of the book and many case studies are provided. Although porridge or mush as existing prior to bread is no longer questioned today, archaeology has yet other scenarios to propose. For instance, the remains of a flat bread-like were recently found in a Middle Eastern site occupied by hunter-gatherers some 4000 years before the beginnings of the Neolithic and cereal-grain-growing [6]. Analysis of the 24 residues indicated that the dough was made of wild grass flour, and sometimes of tuber flour, mixed with water. Their slightly alveolate texture, doubtless unleavened, led the authors to speak of “bread-like products” made by kneading. Not having ovens, the Natufians cooked these breads in ashes or on a hot stone, shown by traces of charring. This discovery has revolutionized our older

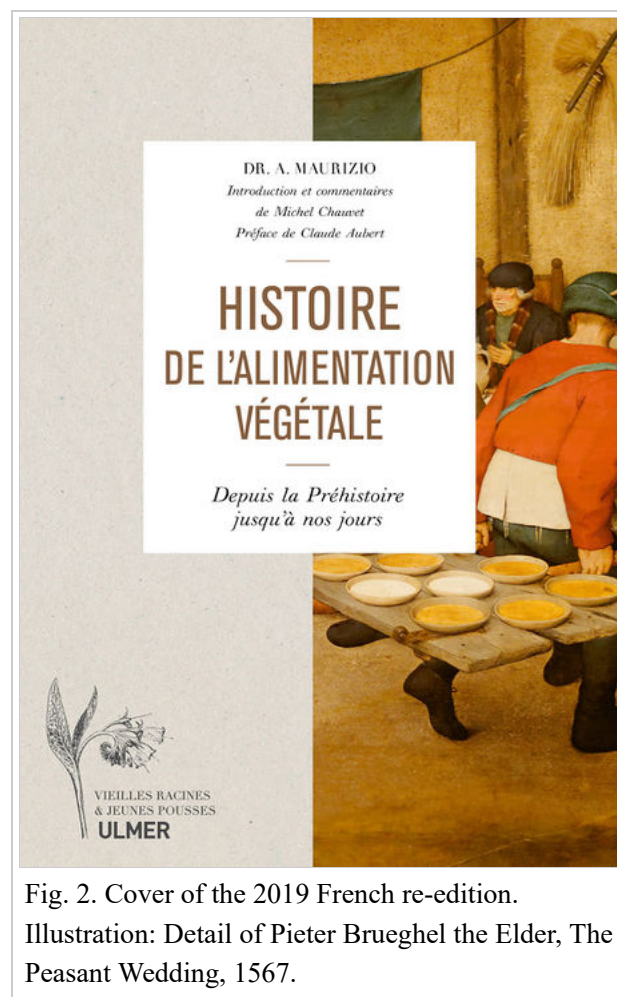


Fig. 2. Cover of the 2019 French re-edition.  
Illustration: Detail of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, The Peasant Wedding, 1567.

explanations by dissociating the invention of baking from the appearance of agriculture in the Fertile Crescent.

To come back to Maurizio, who does not contest the religious and cultural dimension of bread in Europe, he rightly recalls the importance of *bouillies* (mushes or porridges) – liquid or thick, sweet or sour –, and composed of various vegetal products. He calls the lightest ones *bouillons* (broths) and *soupes*. Along with *crêpes* and *galettes*, porridges long represented another way of eating cereal grains, particularly among the poor. As for bread, he paid special attention to the way leavened dough was prepared, to the cooking or baking techniques, as well as to the social hierarchies linked to cereal grains and the types of flour used, such as the high value once placed on white bread in Western Europe – which is no longer the case today. Maurizio also looks into the way bread was made, whether in the household or by craft bakers. The two could be combined: in the Swiss Grisons (Graubünden) in the late 19th and early 20th century, women kneaded bread at home then went to have loaves baked “in great numbers” in the bakeries, considered by their husbands as “chatting salons” (2019, p. 503 et Index)! Other aspects deal with roasted grains, cereals grinding methods, spice breads, and famine breads when non-bread making plants are added. He devotes much effort to fermentations that transform and conserve solid or liquid products (vegetables, porridges, breads, drinks, condiments, etc.). Today, we are rediscovering the nutritional interest of some of these [7].

Mediterranean and tropical countries are little represented, outside of the study of gathered plants (wild asparagus, grasses, etc.). Still, Maurizio describes precisely the preparation of “koukoussou” in the Maghreb with wheat flour, maize, sorghum or oats. He classifies these “sorts of spherical noodles” in the category of food pasta [8]. This staple food, the production of which requires much work and skill, is eaten with various condiments and as a travel food. He notes it is present in the Sahel, based on “millet” – that is to say pearl millet, *Pennisetum glaucum* [9] – or sorghum (2019, p. 476-478). This should especially be noticed, since Sahelian couscous is not well known [10].

Availing himself of all the references, M. Chauvet takes stock of the research carried out since Maurizio's time, whether in food physico-chemistry, microbiology (as for fermentation), the study of *chaînes opératoires*, or the many contributions from ethnology, history and archaeology, different from the work mentioned above. He also points out the development of industrial food production no longer dependent on the seasons but on the geography of transport and new commercial structures. Among these changes, M. Chauvet points out some that escaped Maurizio, such as the choice of European countries to seek supplies of low-cost oil seeds from colonial sources in the late 19th century.

Having emphasized the vast scope of Maurizio's initial project, we can hardly reproach him with limiting his enquiry to plants, with the exception of the hunting of small animals among “savage” peoples or the use of “rancid” meats in the Swiss countryside in a “spirit of thriftiness” (2019, p. 30-31 and 516-517). However, separating vegetable foods from meat poses a problem from a historical standpoint. Meats and fowl were long



Fig. 3. Icelandic moss, *Cetraria islandica* (L.) Ach. An old food resource in Northern Europe, mentioned by Maurizio as among gathered foods (2019, p. 44), still used today even beyond its region of origin. It was kept dried or fermented and played a considerable role in famine times (2019, p. 44-45), as well as having therapeutic uses. Today, it is utilized for its medicinal properties in Europe and North America. © Rémy Poncet, INPN, MNHN, Paris.

reserved, in Europe, to elites and festive meals. They figured among the dishes of the Land of Cockaigne, that dream of abundance, which lasted long after the medieval fable [11]. Aside from religious rules, making do with cereal grains, vegetables, or leguminous plants was a worst-case scenario in modest strata of society and this was carried to great lengths in culinary strategies to hide the lack. For example, the “boneless chicken” in Corrèze (France), also called *mique* or *farcidure*: at the beginning of the 19th century, this was a ball of unleavened dough of buckwheat or maize flour with the addition of some lard, onions, garlic, parsley, sometimes eggs and cooked in a *bouillon* (broth) as is or wrapped in cabbage leaves [12]. The lard indicates that it was prepared on fat days, when eating meat was permitted by the Church or, at least, one talked about eating it! For that matter, Maurizio mentions that in Italy “beans and peas are called the meat of the poor man” (2019, p. 310).

On an entirely different time scale, we might think of the present-day debate on the role that consuming animal protein (meat and fish), along with the cooking of food (vegetables as well as animals), plays out in the evolution of the human species. It is up to each reader to pursue these thoughts, our foodways being more than ever at the very centre of socio-political, economic and identity stakes.

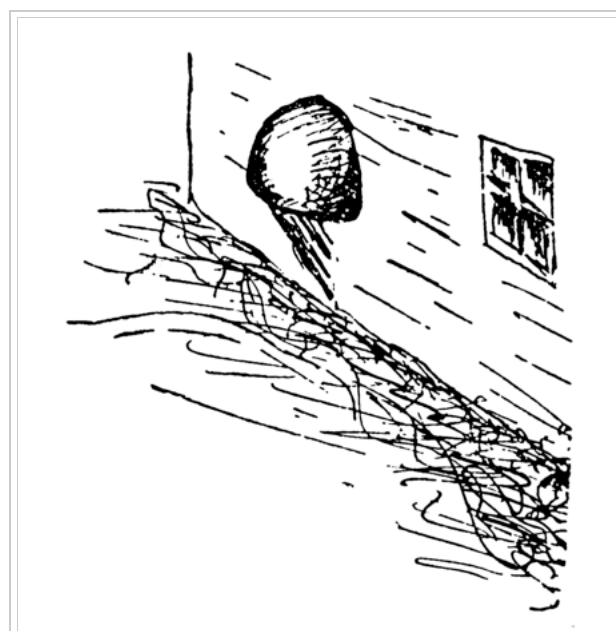


Fig. 4. Domestic oven: observed and drawn by Maurizio in a village of the Grison canton in Switzerland in 1917. The rounded cavity where the baking took place was heated from the inside of the house, but the oven itself was outside, forming a kind of outjut with a built-up support (2019, Fig. 79, p. 438). This type of oven was commonly found in this region when Maurizio wrote the book.

1. Historian, CNRS, Paris. <monique.chastanet@wanadoo.fr>
2. R. Kruker et A. Niederer, « Aspects de la cueillette dans les Alpes suisses », *Études rurales*, 1982, 87-88, p. 139-152.
3. [Peoples of Northern Europe, Asia and America let the leaves, young flowering or leafy shoots, as well as lichens, ferment. Fresh, dried or fermented, these were often used with other plant or animal resources. On the diversity of this gathering (berries, bark, tubers, etc.) and preparation ways, see A. Maurizio, 2019, p. 39-50.]
4. See his article « Nomenclature et identification des produits », in H. Franconie, M. Chastanet et F. Sigaut (éd.), *Couscous, boulgour et polenta. Transformer et consommer les céréales dans le monde*, Paris, Karthala, 2010, p. 443-456.
5. [On the subject of crêpes and galettes in France, see especially A-G. Chaussat, *Les populations du massif armoricain au crible du sarrasin. Etude d'un marqueur culturel du Bocage normand (XVIIe-XXe siècle)*, doctorate dissertation in History at the University of Caen - Normandie, 2017.]
6. A. Arranz-Otaegui *et alii*, "Archeobotanical evidence reveals the origins of bread 14,400 years ago in northeastern Jordan", *PNAS*, 2018, 31, p. 7925-7930.
7. C. Aubert, author of the Preface to this re-edition of Maurizio, *Les aliments fermentés traditionnels. Une richesse méconnue*, Paris, Terre Vivante, 1985.
8. [As also the case in current studies: according to F. Sabban and S. Serventi, “food pasta products are set in a continuum running from couscous to vermicelli” in *Les pâtes. Histoire d'une culture universelle*, Arles, Actes Sud, 2001, p. 67. Also see M. Oubahli, *La main et le pétrin. Alimentation céréalière et pratiques culinaires en Occident musulman au Moyen Âge*, Casablanca, Fondation du Roi Abdul-Aziz Al Saoud pour les Etudes Islamiques et les Sciences Humaines, 2012, chap. VII, Deuxième partie, « Ces

pâtes qu'on appelle couscous ».]

9. [Long called *Pennisetum glaucum* (L.) R. Br., the botanical name of pearl millet changed recently. Belonging to the genus of *Cenchrus*, it was renamed *Cenchrus americanus* (L.) Morrone by some authors in 2010. However, this new name is not unanimously accepted: see discussion in M. Chauvet, *Pl@ntUse*.]
10. [See M. Chastanet, « Couscous 'à la sahélienne' (Sénégal, Mali, Mauritanie) », in H. Franconie, M. Chastanet et F. Sigaut F. (éd.), *Couscous, boulgour et polenta. Transformer et consommer les céréales dans le monde*, Paris, Karthala, 2010, p. 149-187.]
11. F. Quellier, *Gourmandise. Histoire d'un péché capital*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2010, p. 45-62.
12. N. Béronie, *Dictionnaire du patois du Bas-Limousin (Corrèze)*, Tulle, Imprimerie J.-M. Drapeau, 1823: see the entries for FAR and POULO SENS OS. Also see M. Chastanet, « Le maïs en Corrèze, une céréale de complément », in L. Janin (éd.), *Le maïs, de l'or en épi*, Pierre-de-Bresse, Ecomusée de la Bresse bourguignonne, 1998, p. 28.

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