

Diet and Health in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century French and British Caribbean

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“If I cannot drink wine, I do not care if I live or die”. Emotions, food and drink in letters from the 18th century French Caribbean.

The eighteenth-century French Caribbean was, according to the majority of Europeans who went there, a thoroughly hostile and unhealthy place. The climate, flora and fauna constantly challenged the physical health, but also the emotional well-being of the soldiers, sailors, merchants and of course the large number of colonist settlers who had come to the West Indies to partake in the exploitation of stolen land and enslaved humans. During peacetime, French foodstuffs were imported to preserve the health of European bodies and souls, and loved ones would send each other food gifts like macaroni or fruit syrup to convey affection and a sense of belonging. In wartime and/or after natural disasters like hurricanes, however, these supply routes were frequently cut off, creating *disette*. *Disette*, in contemporary letters, did not technically mean famine, but a lack of European foodstuffs. It meant that Europeans, by necessity, had to eat “the fruit of this country” (as many letter-writers put it) which were usually seen as nourishment only fit for the enslaved. This paper explores how this situation was addressed and discussed in letters written by men and women from various social strata, writing to France from Martinique, Guadeloupe and Saint Domingue in the second half of the eighteenth century. It examines how “ordinary” letter writers used the subject of food to create proximity or distance between themselves, others, and the colonies, and delves into the entangled histories of food, taste, physical and emotional belonging, and colonial violence in the Caribbean.

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The Diseases of the British Army. The Medical Gaze on British Troops’ Diet in the Nineteenth-Century Caribbean

Nineteenth-century British and Caribbean historical sources show that European colonists were still constantly struggling to maintain their health in a little-understood tropical climate as well as happened to the first colonists in the Americas and to their other European counterparts of the eighteenth and nineteenth century; as shown by the historical documents they frequently discussed and exchanged advices on how to preserve their well-being that was usually connected with the need of having a nutritious diet. The object of this paper is examining if and to what extent the protection of a specific group of temporary migrants in the Caribbean, those in the armed forces, was a significant concern for the British authorities. *The Medical Gaze* studies medical reports and information in the contemporary press, in order to illustrate how heightened concerns about maintenance of the army’s health led to a fluctuation between at least two different ideas on nutrition. If, on the one side, British empire tried to balance troops’ health and economy, on the other, British doctors fought to investigate why the mortality rates among the troops were high and informed the metropole that a wholesome diet was central in order to maintain the strength of the army. Accordingly, the paper discusses on the continuous alternation between two contemporary issues, too, the hard choice of deciding between the related issues of health and economy, that was the choice between giving the troops food provision mainly based on preserved food imported from the British homeland or nourishing them on fresh local food.

