Welcome to HMSC Connects! where we go behind the scenes of four Harvard museums to explore the connections between us, our big, beautiful world, and even what lies beyond. My name is Jennifer Berglund, part of the exhibits team here at the Harvard Museums of Science and Culture. And I'll be your host. Today, I'm speaking with Joyce Chaplin, a Historian of Early America and Early European Colonialism at Harvard. She says she's most drawn to topics where people are interacting with non-human parts of the natural world, like agriculture, environmental history, science, medicine, and the history of food. And that last topic is where our paths crossed. The exhibits team and I recently collaborated with her on an exhibit at the Peabody Museum called Resetting the Table: Food and Our Changing Tastes. I wanted to talk to her about that and learn more about the relevance of the exhibit in light of the events we're all currently living through. Here she is. Joyce Chaplin. Welcome to the show.

Joyce Chaplin 01:31
Hey, Jennifer, thanks so much for having me.

Jennifer Berglund 01:37
You teach a gen ed course at Harvard called American Food: A Global History. This ultimately led to an exhibit we worked on together at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology called Resetting the Table. Can you talk about the idea behind the exhibit? And what message were you trying to get across through the lens of food?

Joyce Chaplin 02:03
I think there's a lot that food can say about our present condition our past our future quite definitely. Quite often, when people hear food as a topic, they tend to think in terms of what I call the the fun end of the scale, you know, the pleasure of eating, what you like eating, eating out, you know, in fact, a lot of things that we're not able to do at the moment.

Jennifer Berglund 02:30
Exactly.

Joyce Chaplin 02:31
There's a lot in food history that's the bitter end of it about hunger, exploitation of certain people to produce food for others, actual starvation, food rationing during times of emergency,
all kinds of grimmer topics that are as valid, at least as valid, within food history. And as in my class, I really wanted the exhibit to get at that to say, hey, you eat three meals a day. You know something about food, and you probably associate food with gratification and sociability. And giving a cupcake to your child or whatever. But there’s a bigger, longer history that is, let's say, more serious than that. And that sheds light on all the reasons that we think of food as enjoyable, pleasurable, sociable and important in those ways. So I wanted the exhibit to have a kind of message saying to people, you know, we can think about this in relation to the past look at this object, look at this case. But really, what I'm trying to say is think about food today in this way. Think about it critically, about who gets to eat this, who doesn't, who has to produce food under what conditions, and so the exhibit turned out to be about food really and power and status--how status dictates who is able to eat and in what kinds of ways, and how power dictates who has to produce food more than they get to eat it.

Jennifer Berglund 04:08
One of the things I found really fascinating about the exhibit and that really sort of gets to the heart of what you’re talking about here is it's centered around this menu from a meal for Harvard students. Can you talk about that menu and what it signifies?

Joyce Chaplin 04:28
This is a menu I found when I was putting together the class on food for a private dinner that the Harvard class of 1913 organized for themselves at the end of their freshman year in 1910. And it's not clear everyone in the class went. It wasn't like a private clubby a thing. But certainly you had to be able to pay to go have this elaborate dinner at a now defunct restaurant in Boston with multiple courses, imported items, expensive seasonal items, and French champagne running cold throughout the dinner.

Jennifer Berglund 05:09
Wow. And it always taught really well because students were like, what? Kind of unbelievable. Oh, the other thing is this is a menu that lists two kinds of cigarettes for young people who are 18, 19 years old. Here! Two kinds of cigarettes along with the champagne that, you know, wouldn't be included formally on a menu for freshmen, unless they were older than average. So it just always fascinated students. And it was great to teach with because I could say, okay, right. You don’t sit down in a restaurant, maybe, with most of your class and have this very French-influenced formal dinner. But there are equivalents, right? Once they begin to think about it, they’re like, right, there are formal house dinners that, to some extent, replicate this experience. And then there's all the private stuff that especially students who have more money might do. So it was a great way, again, of getting students to think about privilege. What it’s like to belong to a population if you attend Harvard that is privileged compared to other people United States, let alone the rest of the world. How is that privilege exhibited? How much does it cost? Who gets included or not in that whole experience? What
do you think a student of today, if they took a time machine and saw this, how do you think they would view it today?

Joyce Chaplin 06:43
I really even think that if a student went back in time and walked into Memorial Hall, first of all, they’d have to be male. Radcliffe women, eight separately, they were not allowed in, so already half of the Harvard class today would be excluded from this kind of gentlemanly experience, which was true at a lot of restaurants even beyond Harvard that they were male spaces. And most restaurants, unless you were like an opera-singing celebrity, as a woman, you could not go in alone, period. You were just not allowed in. You would have to be escorted by a gentleman. So walking into Memorial Hall, first of all, you’d have to be male. Second of all, unless you were of that tiny number of men who weren't white, everyone would wonder why are you here? So even sitting down with a really overwhelming majority white male population, just to have breakfast, would have made it absolutely clear, you know, so who was Harvard for, and in this era, the elite. And at a moment when we know that white supremacy was part of the politics of the United States. Even if men were from families of students were from families who didn't directly participate in that, they're beneficiaries of that. Meanwhile, I mean, again, if we have that student going back in time, who's sitting there wondering, oh, my God already, then it becomes really apparent that everyone working--may I take your order? And then bringing you your food. Overwhelmingly, they're going to be black men from the greater Boston area. And again, this reflects how food service at the time was associated with domestics defined as people who were kind of considered permanently working class. Their children would never go to Harvard, it was thought, and instead, they were there to service the economy and the economic needs of the elite.

Jennifer Berglund 08:56
Do you have a favorite object, or favorite story?

Joyce Chaplin 09:00
This is always hard, because I have, you know, I could come up with a list of 10 easily. But one object. There's that beautiful Syrian coffee pot that's blue enamel with dangling beads on it. It's just, it's a gorgeous object, and it's one of those food-related objects where even looking at it, you can imagine how it feels in the hand. And it just seems right. You can imagine pouring coffee out of that. And so it's beautiful to the eye. It looks just really comfortable. And I myself like coffee. I can imagine the deliciousness of what it would provide. I really also think that the history of coffee and how it becomes a standard beverage almost universally throughout the world now is really fascinating how it comes out of Africa via the Near East into Europe very, very early on into Boston. Boston has a coffeehouse very early in the history of drinking coffee. So, there's just this long history of us wanting, those of us who drink coffee, that beverage that comes from a very particular part of the world from a very particular coffee
drinking culture and becomes universalized. It's a really interesting story about how food invariably, each kind of food item, comes from a particular place and with a particular community of knowledge about how you grow that, how you process it, how you make it into something that humans can consume. And then even though that's a very specific particular history, other people might find it attractive. And that's always what's really fascinating within food history. The connecting story about the rice that was grown in South Carolina and Georgia. It's a story that I worked on for so long that was in my dissertation. And it was just amazing to find in the Peabody Museum examples of the fanner baskets that were originally made in West Africa for cleaning the rice, where it would be ground in a mortar to loosen the hull, and then with a fanner basket, you would take that grain and fling it up in the air with the right kind of breeze, so that the wind would carry away the chaff. And these are very characteristic baskets made in the parts of West Africa that grew the rice that was transferred to plantations in South Carolina and Georgia, and the enslaved people who knew how to grow the rice also knew how to clean it. And they started making baskets within Georgia, South Carolina, all along the coastline to do that. So this case that is about the rice in the exhibit has a basket from West Africa, a photograph of it, actually. And then one of the baskets says made now along the coastline of Georgia, South Carolina. This basket that was made in in America was from the 1980s. And so this is just an amazing story about engagement with and dependence on the United States of economic growth on enslavement of people. And it just makes it incredibly tangible that even something like your daily food, the rice that people might have eaten, especially a lot of the rice was exported to Catholic parts of Europe, but it remained, I mean, people ate it in the United States in the early 19th century. If you're going to be eating rice during that period of time, the United States was probably from this region. So that story, showing material culture, the surrounded enslavement, and the knowledge that captives from Africa had and, and transferred. It's not a story I like in the terms of it being charming, but it's an important story. And I was so glad that the museum had the objects that made it so tangible, a part of the exhibit.

Jennifer Berglund 13:34
A lot has happened in recent months. To put it mildly. The museums are shut down right now because of COVID. There have been a lot of, sort of a mild way to put it is revelations about police brutality and racism. And there have been protests and the like. Reflecting on current events, has anything changed about how you feel about the exhibit, or maybe reinforced the way you feel about the exhibit?

Joyce Chaplin 14:06
I think if anything, reinforced is the word mainly about my choice to make this about food and status and power because that's really what we're seeing now is difference of privilege and status and how that has played out in terms of anti-Black prejudice in the United States. So, the parts of the exhibit on the inequality that was built into food service at Harvard until well
into the 20th century, the parts about enslavement and exploitation of labor to produce food, it just seems like, obviously, this still matters. And I've got to point out the amazing number of instances of what's happening now, there's a connection to food. So

**Jennifer Berglund** 15:01
How so?

**Joyce Chaplin** 15:02
The fact that George Floyd was apprehended and murdered outside an establishment called Cub Foods, a convenience store, the way in which similar killing of a black man was at a Wendy's fast food restaurant. There are just, it seems to me, multiple ways in which we're reminded that because everyone has to eat every day, yet everyone doesn't enjoy the same level of dignity and respect for their rights, including their lives, within the United States, that that need to obtain food, what kinds of food are available, which kinds of stores or eating establishments are common for most people United States. It just seems like food remains an amazingly revealing lens to examine what's going on in any given society, including the United States now. There was also, you know, it's amazing now what gets caught on camera. A policewoman not getting what she'd ordered at a McDonald's quickly enough and having a kind of meltdown, and again, a moment where, who's allowed to be enraged? When the fast food isn't fast enough. What does that mean about us as a society, that this can be an everyday action that can be now witnessed by gazillions of people because it's recorded?

**Jennifer Berglund** 16:34
Yeah, that's a that's a very good point. It's sort of, it's a seismic shift in our understanding of privilege and what specific kinds of people feel entitled to that, maybe, was in the shadows before.

**Joyce Chaplin** 16:51
Yes, and I do think that because of the pandemic, the distinction between what we used to do more in private and now what has to be a kind of more public and visible activity is also problematic and revealing, very, very revealing about who we are and how we live. The ways also in which, you know, restaurants have mostly been enclosed, and people who want that kind of experience have to seek other options and their sense of why they should be able to do that, you know, even if it might be dangerous is that's interesting as well, because the whole question about the food supply chain, and again, the designation of a lot of food service workers as essential workers, so people picking crops in the Central Valley, people working in meatpacking, who are really being encouraged, coerced to work when that might not be good for them, and they are not able to quarantine or even take care of themselves that they're sick because of that designation that their essential workers, people need to eat. It's true we need
to eat. But I really think this would be a good moment to reexamine the conditions under which people are producing food. I'm so sad people don't go see the exhibit.

Jennifer Berglund  18:19
Yeah. I know.

Joyce Chaplin  18:21
I really would love to know how people would react to it now. I know there's been this ongoing project to have people write down answers to certain questions, some of which then get posted at one end of the exhibit. And I understand that a lot of those would, especially at the start of the exhibit have been more on the fun end of food stuff. You know, more about what you like to eat, what your food memories are, what your family prepared. And that's great. I do wonder now whether once the museum reopens,

Jennifer Berglund  18:56
Exactly.

Joyce Chaplin  18:57
There couldn't maybe be a harder set of questions about, do you remember being refused food service? What could you not afford growing up? What is your opinion about fast food and convenience stores? There could be something that gets at the more overt questions not just about experience of food but experience of power and status as related through food. And I would really, that would be fascinating to see how people respond to that kind of question, which might have been offputting earlier they were like, well, you know, I don't wanna think about that. I'm here to enjoy the exhibit. But now I wonder whether people be like, no, actually, I do want to talk about that. At the moment, people might be ready for a kind of harder conversation. They'd want to have that. I don't know whether everyone looks at the pictures that depict food service at Harvard reflecting social inequality, and thinks about that seriously. It might register, and then they move to the next case, whereas now people might spend more time in front of that, and really think about, well, maybe Harvard doesn't literally do this anymore. Maybe it's not so apparent in the United States anymore, but we obviously still have that as part of our history, and it's not resolved. If the exhibit is about food and power, I mean, we can just put a question saying to people, when were you really, when were you most aware that food wasn't just something that fed you, but was about differential access to certain kinds of food or certain kinds of food experiences? What was your strongest memory? What was your earliest memory? Because I think that people had that. And now maybe people will be more willing to talk about it. And it will be very interesting to see whether people talk about it in relation to themselves, "well I wasn't given this," or they'll say, "well, you know, the first time I witnessed it happening to somebody else," and that would be interesting. But I just think that
reminding people that there are two themes of the exhibit--food and power--and then saying, well, you know, talk about in some way what that might mean for you.

Jennifer Berglund 21:14
Joyce Chaplin, thank you so much for being here. This has been really great.

Joyce Chaplin 21:18
Thank you so much. It was wonderful to revisit the exhibit, especially since I can’t actually revisit it. So thank you so much.

Jennifer Berglund 21:34
Today's HMSC Connects! Podcast was produced by me Jennifer Berglund and the Harvard Museums of Science and Culture. Special thanks to Joyce Chaplin for her wisdom and expertise. And thank you so much for listening. If you liked today’s podcast, please subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Podbean or wherever you get your podcasts. See you next week!