FOOD is an important part of human life. Many cities and cultures have evolved around food influencing the food-style, the way of preparation and taste. But while there might be many books on food, starting from the cook your own food to ‘health and diet’ books, Dinner with Darwin by Jonathan Silvertown, an evolutionary ecologist from the University of Edinburgh, presents the relationship between food, humans, plants, animals and the environment. His books are known for their holistic description. For instance, his book An Orchard Invisible illustrates the development of the seed during the course of evolution. Many reviewers and readers have highlighted his differential approach to evolutionary science.

“Eat to live and not to live to eat” is a famous philosophical quote. Does that also mean that we should be aware of what we eat and how we eat? This point is vividly highlighted in this book. The book has fourteen chapters all of them precise in their approach.

In a metaphorical sense, the first chapter is titled “An invitation to Dinner”. I also recommend the readers to accept this specific dinner invitation for this event serves shellfish (Chapter 3), Bread (Chapter 4), Soup (Chapter 5), Fish (Chapter 6), Meat (Chapter 7), Vegetables (Chapter 8), Spices (Chapter 9), Desserts (Chapter 10), Cheese (Chapter 11) and finally the feast concludes with wine and beer (Chapter 12).

Two chapters – Chapters 2 and 14 – are especially compelling as well as contemporarily very significant. Chapter 2 narrates about a species in the entire animal kingdom that cooks and eats its food so meticulously. It is about us, the Homo sapiens – the most evolved creature on the planet. Our genus had other relatives and they are collectively termed as ‘Hominins’. The author points out the reason for the extinction of the other hominins. The book also has some funny narrations such as ‘El Dia de los Muertos’ – Day of the Dead which is depicted in the 2018 Oscar Award-winning animated movie Coco. Silvertown intertwines a web to highlight the relevance of scientific facts to the cultural habits of humans, while at the same time explain the context of evolution as well.

Similarly, Chapter 14 is far ahead of the theme of the book. Still, the author brings in a connectivity by putting
forward a positive argument for Genetically Modified (GM) crops. He states that the GM crops are necessary for satisfying the food security needs of the rising population. However, he warns us not to be prejudiced by his comments when he puts across a question to the readers which needs to be answered critically – ‘Who is to be benefited by the introduction of GM crops?’

After a narration of human evolution in Chapter 2, Silvertown sets up the table for the feast. The first dish intended to be served here is Shellfish, a seafood. Seafood is rich in Omega-3 fatty acid that is crucial for brain development. Hence, there is a linkage between consumption of seafood and human evolution. And the story spins around the Neanderthals and their migration along the coastal areas to other parts of the world, consuming shellfish as food. Chapter 3 is the breeding concept of wheat which evolved with bread consumption.

From Chapters 4 to 7, the evolutionary development of taste receptors and the concept of flavour is discussed. Although the chapters do not have any structural conclusion or summary at the end, the author makes it a point to make a connection between subsequent chapters. For example, while concluding Chapter 6, the author narrates the development of taste receptors with regard to fishing and continues with a similar topic in Chapter 7 that discusses the domestication of farm animals. The story of human selection, domestication and cultivation continued in vegetables also. Among the plant-based food items, herbs and spices used in cooking are mentioned specifically in Chapter 9 because the secondary metabolites in these plants produced are an evolutionary adaptation to mitigate threats and humans have found a way to use them.

Deserts and Cheese encompass items ranging from sugarcane to milk and excess consumption of these items are often a cause of several prevalent problems in the society such as obesity and diabetes.

Finally, Silvertown’s dinner ends with wine and beer; these alcohol-based intoxicating drinks are actually toxic substances. Unlike other toxic substances, people across generations have developed a tolerance for alcohol and it has become a part of our genetic traits. The chapter also looks at grapevine domestication as well as the co-evolution of the yeasts.

The book might be overwhelming at first sight but it has more to offer than anyone can imagine. Rather than recommending this book to a specific audience, I would suggest this book to any general English reader who loves eating – a foodie.

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