Barnard professor explores the rich, sweet history of milk

September 23 2011, By Meghan Berry

Throughout history, milk has been a symbol of motherhood and fertility, but also prosperity, health and strength. In Hindu mythology a churning ocean of milk releases the nectar of immortality. Statues of the Egyptian goddess Isis show her nursing her son, Horus. Romans credited the creation of the Milky Way to the spraying breast milk of the goddess Juno.

Such stories have long intrigued Deborah Valenze, a Barnard professor who specializes in the social and cultural history of 18th-and 19th-century Britain and teaches in the Columbia history program. With a particular interest in food and agriculture, she has offered courses such as “A Social and Cultural History of Food in Europe” and “Edible Conflicts: A History of Food.”

Now Valenze, who won a Guggenheim Fellowship in April, has turned her storyteller’s eye on this staple of the global diet in her new book, Milk: A Local and Global History, released in June by Yale University Press. For so ubiquitous a drink, the literature was surprisingly sparse, she said. The story of milk had been told from culinary and commercial perspectives, but its cultural significance was all but ignored.

“Milk is perceived locally, meaning people see it differently depending where they’ve been brought up,” Valenze said. “I had to set aside my own ideas about it and ask, ‘How did this era see milk?’”

Her book chronicles milk’s production and interaction with culture from

its earliest references in Babylonian cuneiform to modern times—a history of the world through a lactose lens.

During the Renaissance, when only the wealthy could afford rudimentary ice boxes, it was considered dangerous to consume dairy. Yet people indulged in cheeses, cream and even cheesecake; the sumptuousness combined with an element of risk made the eating experience exciting, Valenze said. In colonial America, milk denoted prosperity. “Americans found the cow and household dairy harmonious with the idea of independence,” Valenze explained.

She found letters from Victorian essayist Thomas Carlyle (known for coining the term “the dismal science,” a reference to economics) describing how he drank milk to cure his indigestion. “Some believed that milk was some kind of antidote to systems that had been overfed,” she said. “It was used as treatment in sanatoriums. It became part of the medical establishment.”

Just before World War I, American biochemist Elmer McCollum discovered vitamin A, further bolstering milk’s status as a health food. McCollum, who also discovered vitamins B and D, was sent around the country by President Herbert Hoover to espouse the health benefits of dairy, giving sales boosts to such new products as ice cream and powdered milk.

“Then milk was seen as nutritious—a builder of bones and strength,” Valenze said. “This was very attractive during wartime. People thought that with the right diet, countries could build a strong population.”

Yet Milk’s final chapter, “Milk Today,” dips into negative perceptions of dairy. The 1970s-era cholesterol consciousness brought unwanted attention to milk’s fat content, spurring the production of skim, 1 percent and 2 percent milk. Americans have also become highly critical of milk

additives, particularly growth hormones given to cows to boost their productivity, and now seek out organic and even raw milk straight from the teat.

“Given how passionately people have felt about milk in the past, the negative wave of sentiment in the late 20th century isn’t surprising,” Valenze said. “It’s not as essential—or magical—as people once thought it was, but it still carries associations and characteristics that prove it to be an integral part of the world we live in.”

For all she has learned about milk, Valenze herself doesn’t drink it. “I’m lactose sensitive,” she confessed.

Provided by Columbia University