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The Botany of Desire: A Plant’s-Eye View of the World
New York: Random House, 2001
xxv + 271 pp. $24.95 (cloth)

Michael Pollan’s new book, The Botany of Desire is, as the title suggests, a sort of hybrid. A vigorous mix of the natural and social, Pollan’s widely acclaimed book offers a social history of angiosperms and a natural history of human obsessions. It is a garrulous, and very witty, meditation on the tangled histories of plants and modernity. But it is also something else, at once a *memoire* and an unconventional gardening manual. And not least it is a ringing endorsement of what Karl Marx once called commodity fetishism, the magical deceit lying at the heart of modern capitalism.

In the same way that Rainer Maria Rilke read into his obsession with the rose the very metaphysics of the human condition (including his own death), so does Pollan see in the lowly angiosperms a sort of hidden history of modern desire and human urges. The Botany of Desire, it needs to be said, is rather more approachable than Poems from the Book of Hours, or for that matter the depressive, annoying, Czech-German poet himself. But Rilke was on to something. One can see in his poetry a trace of what now passes as deep ecology and the spiritual side of nature philosophies, but there is also the faint hint of something else, what Pollan provocatively captures in his clever observation that genes are “archives of cultural as well as natural information” (p.xvii). Botanical impulses, that is to say, shape some of our most abiding aesthetic, psychological, and social desires. None of this may strike the reader as terribly original. Much scholarly ink has been spilled on the question of mountain topography and the notion of the sublime, in much the same way that Nature and Nation are now understood as constructing each other through a sort of political ecology. After all, the great and quirky evolutionary biologist Gregory Bateson had laid the foundation for the co-evolutionary thinking about Nature and Culture several decades ago. What Pollan offers, however, is a particular reckoning of this co-evolution of humans and the environments of which they are part, by honing in on a quartet of life forms, actually four familiar plants (the tulip, the apple, the cannabis, and the potato), and four corresponding desires (beauty, sweetness, intoxication, and control). Rather than accepting these plants as “domesticated species,” Pollan views them as repositories of cultural (as well as natural) information: the tulip contains something of the aesthetics of the Ottoman Turk, the Russett Burbank potato of “our taste for long, perfectly golden French fries” (p.xvii). What
is on offer is a natural history of human desires: human ideas and preferences and values end up as natural facts. In Pollan’s eyes beauty is a complex Man/Nature hybrid—a cyborg even. In emphasizing co-evolution, however, Pollan wishes to push further, trying to sustain an argument that such plants have domesticated us. As an antidote to what he calls the overestimation of our own agency in nature (“human invented agriculture,” “the human domination of nature,” and so on), The Botany of Desire suggests that “it makes just as much sense to think of agriculture as something the grasses did to people” (p.xxi). The advent of angiosperms a hundred million years ago made Rilke possible; indeed, it made him what he was.

Each of the four narratives in the book—built around a fruit, a flower, a drug, and a staple food—takes the form of a wide-ranging journey, typically beginning in or around Pollan’s garden and then traversing huge swathes of history and geography. All of these commodities have long and complex histories in relation to the marketplace, and each has deeply interesting social and natural histories. Pollan’s ability to weave the enticing and often weird histories of these plants into a rich tapestry of personal, evolutionary, and philosophical reflection is something of a wonder. For each plant there is a sort of foundational moment, a ground zero at which the desire associated with it reaches a sometimes ridiculous or pathetic apotheosis. For the tulip it is seventeenth-century Amsterdam and the mad speculative bubble in which tulips became more precious than gold. For cannabis it is a complex Man/Nature hybrid—a cyborg even. In emphasizing co-evolution, however, Pollan wishes to push further, trying to sustain an argument that such plants have domesticated us. As an antidote to what he calls the overestimation of our own agency in nature (“human invented agriculture,” “the human domination of nature,” and so on), The Botany of Desire suggests that “it makes just as much sense to think of agriculture as something the grasses did to people” (p.xxi). The advent of angiosperms a hundred million years ago made Rilke possible; indeed, it made him what he was.

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The tangled social and natural histories of the plants have multiple paths, replete with twists, turns, bizarre episodes, and sometimes dead ends and cul-de-sacs, but they are always enlivened by the peculiarities of the plants themselves. The apple’s heroic trek out of Kazakhstan—a center of diversity discovered by the great Russian geneticist Vavilov, who noted a simply astonishing variety of fruits, a number of which resembled olives, cherries, and ping-pong balls—was shaped by the botanical fact that edible apples don’t come from seed. Its history is accordingly one of heroic individuals, rather than of groups or types or lines.

The trope of the healthy American apple began its life in the decidedly unseemly, and unhealthy, cider industry, but the trajectory from alcoholic intoxication to the high-pedigree Golden Delicious has, it turns out, been coeval with the massive varietal reduction to a handful of genetically identical clones that suit our, or at least someone’s, taste and practice. As Pollan puts it, the species fitness for life in nature has been “dangerously compromised” (p.52). Marijuana followed two divergent paths: one as hemp from China to the Americas, which turned on the plants’ fibers and its utility for cord, paper, and cloth. The other deviated from the first and ended up as cannabis, a drug first deployed in Europe by witches and sorcerers. After ten thousand years the two plants are a study in radical difference. Pollan is concerned with the psychoactive development of the plant and offers a brilliant account that takes the reader from Marco Polo, to the *sativa* × *indica* hybrids developed in the U.S., to the discovery of THC receptors in the human brain. The receptors are all over the brain (though not in the brain stem) and turn out to be responsive to the brain’s own endogenous cannabinoid, which evolved as a way, perhaps, of helping us forget, especially traumatic pain like childbirth. It is, says Pollan, “a drug for coping with the human condition” (p.155).

Tulips and potatoes prove to be less compelling cases. Tulipomania—a Dutch obsession stolen from the Ottomans—is indeed a remarkable story, but Pollan provides no satisfactory explanation for it. The peculiar combination of reason and unreason encapsulated in the beauty of the tulip was, says Pollan, a Dionysian outbreak, a carnivalesque upturning of the stable and sanctioned order of Dutch society and capitalism. But this is hardly plausible in capitalistic or socio-cultural terms (why should this have occurred within the massive anal retentiveness of the Low Country cosmos?). Does tulipomania really represent a “repeal” of the rules of capitalism (p.101), or is it not a stunning confirmation of their irreducible logic? The account of the NewLeaf (GMO) potato, and of Pollan’s reluctance to plant the dastardly tuber in his garden, is not so much
implausible as naïve. The potato speaks powerfully to the grinding, clanking gears of capitalism, imperialism, self-interest, and profit (what else was the great Potato Famine of Ireland?). And it is precisely such sentiments that Pollan underplays in a Pollyannish account of his dealings with Monsanto and Idaho contract growers (the closest that “family farmers” will get to wage slavery).

Pollan commences The Botany of Desire with an unacknowledged nod to Karl Marx. His image of the “human bumblebee” suggests that we are the objects of other species’ desires. Marx, of course, distinguishes us from the bees precisely because of our capacity for symbolic self-reflection; unlike the bee building a hive, we commence with a self-conscious design or plan. Pollan too often slides into an evolutionary-speak of the Richard Dawkins-Steven Pinker sort (“we share with insects a tropism toward flowers” and so on) and a tendency to underestimate human agency. In this sense, Pollan has not really proven his primary case at all. His book does many things very well, but it has not demonstrated in any robust sense what “grass does to people.” To invoke nature’s agency in co-evolution in any case is a healthy but dangerous exercise; human and natural agency are, to deploy the lingo of philosophers, part of a stratified world of determination and causal powers. Nature can indeed be resistant to and act against human practice (genetic drift, global warming). But Nature biting back should not conflate two different sorts of agency at work. Indeed, what is most compelling about Pollan’s book is the overwhelming, transformative, and, yes, dominating sense of human agency, an agency that, by the time we reach the NewLeaf potato, is radically shaping the foundation of life itself (let’s call it Nature by Design). And the nature of the forces at work in this molecular and recombinant revolution—harnessed to the revolutionary powers of capital—are almost nowhere to be seen in this book. At the very least, this would suggest something of a rupture between the “co-evolution” of Ottoman tulip growers and the “co-evolution” represented by Monanto, Genentech, and germplasm. All of which is to say there is another desire harnessed to plants and animals; it’s called profit. And it ain’t pretty. It casts a long shadow over Pollan’s laudable, overwhelming, transformative, and, yes, dominating sense of human agency.

When most of us eat smoked salmon, a slice of prosciutto, or spread raspberry jam on our toast, we are unlikely to consider that these morsels owe their existence to human-kind’s desire to extend the usefulness of a newly caught fish, a freshly butchered hog, or a fragile fruit. We enjoy those foods in their altered, preserved states merely because the process has created a novel, toothsome flavor, not because they are otherwise unavailable. Especially today, when fresh food from nearly anywhere on the globe is available to most consumers in developed countries, food preservation is simply not the life-and-death matter it was in very early times. Rather, it seems, we have focused our efforts on outwitting the seasons by producing and distributing from all over the world all manner of fresh or industrially preserved fare.

This is, as Sue Shephard points out in Pickled, Potted, and Canned: How the Art and Science of Food Preserving Changed the World, a mixed blessing, the latest, but hardly original, cog in the wheel of refinement that means that even ordinary people can now participate in what used to be the gentry’s privilege: eating anything one’s heart desires at any time. Of course, one of the first casualties of this privilege is flavor. But there are other losses as well. Shephard quotes Elizabeth David: “We lose the sense of place and feel of the seasons.” In a world of great variety and choice, many of us are becoming re-acquainted with seasonal and truly local foods, as well as with traditionally preserved foods, in yet another top-down movement, as cutting-edge chefs and food professionals reintroduce eating habits many of us gave up fifty or more years ago. Further, Shephard points out, in traditional societies in undeveloped corners of the world, the introduction of manufactured foods weaned populations away from their own food production and long-evolved diet, often to the great detriment of their health and at the risk of famine when food distribution is disrupted by natural or human calamity. Putting people back in touch with their traditional growing and preserving habits provides a fail-safe against hard times, as well as a way for each of us to re-affirm our cultural identities. Sue Shephard’s purpose is to remind us of the collective historical wisdom about putting food by, and perhaps encourage us to recapture some of what we may have lost along the way.

—Michael Watts, University of California, Berkeley

Pickled, Potted, and Canned: How the Art and Science of Food Preserving Changed the World
Sue Shephard
368 pp. Illustrations. $26.00 (cloth)
Pickled, Potted, and Canned is as comprehensive a guide to the complex topic of food preservation as we have seen in a while. Individual topics—charcuterie, marmalade making, ice harvesting, smoke cooking, pickle making, for example—have been covered nicely in other books, some of which even provide a history of the practice. Sue Shephard covers all the bases: drying, fermenting, smoking; preserving in vinegar, salt, and sugar; preserving dairy products; cooking, potting, canning, making concentrates; refrigerating and freezing; and dehydrating whole meals in vacuum-packed bags. She has a wonderful chapter on food in the navy and another about journeys of exploration and settlement. Her chronological scope is from ancient to modern times and another about journeys of exploration and settlement. Her range is global, though her home base and main point of reference is Great Britain, where this book was originally published. Overall, it is really quite an ambitious volume. It was for me both a fun and frustrating read. Shephard pulls together her material mostly from secondary sources, a vast list of which is provided in her Select Bibliography, which delivers up plenty of choices for further exploration if we are so inclined. Most of the time, she has a good eye for authenticity, and her use of good primary source examples pulled from these secondary ones enriches the text. But, she reports, since the book is intended for a broad readership, she has chosen not to use footnotes. Those of us who have a less casual interest in this topic are bound to wonder just where certain assertions come from. There is an index, so anyone needing background on garum, landjager, sweet meats, or Clarence Birdseye can look them up.

Shephard does invite inquiries about sources, corrections, and comments by e-mail, so if we have absolutely burning questions we can ask. There are bound to be some, if others have the experience I had of reading about a familiar topic and noting minor misapprehensions or omissions, inevitable in so comprehensive a work.

Considering how much ground Shephard covers in this book, it would probably be churlish to wish the author had covered in greater depth such topics as why certain foods were preserved as they were. For example, why choose fermentation over, say, drying? What is it chemically or structurally about each foodstuff that influences its preservation in one fashion or another? How much effect does climate have on those choices? We see glimpses of these topics and they invite more questions.

A particularly revealing aspect of the book results from Shephard’s drive to point out the universal inclinations to use certain preservation methods in many places on the globe, over a long period of time. To read, for example, about all the different fermented cabbage products gives us a sense of humankind’s united approach to cabbage keeping. Her chapter on refrigeration and freezing is particularly fascinating and gives the reader an exceedingly long perspective on the use of cold and our many attempts through history to create artificial winter.

I cannot think of any better place than this book to start an exploration of food keeping over time. Sue Shephard paints a big picture and gives us a springboard for deeper investigation.

—Sandra Oliver, Publisher, Food History News

The World of Caffeine: The Science and Culture of the World’s Most Popular Drug
Bennett Alan Weinberg and Bonnie K. Bealer
New York: Routledge, 2001
384 pp. Illustrations. $27.50 (cloth)

Caffeine, C₈ H₁₀ N₄ O₂, is the fuel that drives this ambitious book. Bennett Alan Weinberg and Bonnie K. Bealer have written a wide-ranging, well-written, and entertaining book. In fact, the volume seems to consist of two only vaguely related books, the first on the history of human consumption of coffee, tea, and cacao, the second on their medical consequences. While using anecdotes and quotes from the “heroic periods” of these drinks—the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when they were first introduced into Europe—the authors rehearse the observations of others who came before: Ralph Hattox, Ulla Heise, Wolfgang Schivelbusch, and William Ukers, among others. They base their work only on English-language sources and overwhelmingly on secondary sources; their main contribution is to bring together, in lively prose, disparate issues by looking at various caffeinated drinks. This volume is clearly intended for a general audience whose interest in caffeine has grown with the recent coffee and tea crazes in the U.S.

The sources that Weinberg and Bealer consulted have led them to repeat the elitist, Eurocentric history so common in the literature on the history of coffee. This is an anecdotal history that dotes on Great Men, heroic, often military events, kings and queens, extravagant aristocrats, and keen-witted intellectuals. It is a history of origins—the search for the first person to introduce the beverage—and it puts forth the assumption that the dissemination of caffeinated beverages was natural: Because coffee, tea, and chocolate are good to drink, ever more people came to drink them once presented with the opportunity. Thus we have the Ethiopian goatherder Kaldi, the Austrian spy Kolshitzky, Pope Clement viii, Queen Catherine of Braganza, Goethe, Voltaire, and Harvey. These oft-repeated stories are charming, but their significance, not to mention
their veracity, is doubtful. We are told, for example, that “the vehicle of chocolate had enabled Cardinal Richelieu to create the conditions for Louis XIV’s absolute power” and that the Turkish coffee served to Louis XIV was “some of the strongest ever made” (p. 70). These assertions are very hard to prove.

The problem with concentrating on origins is that they do not explain why tastes change. Why did the English go from being western Europe’s leading consumers of coffee to, along with the Russians, the main tea drinkers? The same happened in Turkey, while Yemen, the first home of coffee cultivation, converted to qat, a local stimulant. Why has per capita coffee consumption in the United States fallen in half since the end of World War II? The mere introduction of caffeinated drinks does not suffice to guarantee their continued popularity. To understand the mass appeal of these drinks, one would have to move from cultural history to social, economic, and business history. Such mundane issues as packaging, processing, advertising, distribution, and lifestyle had far more to do with the spread of these beverages than did aristocratic habits, intellectual foibles, or heroic deeds.

Weinberg and Bealer are unclear about the attraction of tea, coffee, and cacao. Presumably not just great men, women, and fashion were involved. From the title of the book one would assume that caffeine was the hook. Discussing current consumption, the authors state that “caffeine has reemerged as the drug of choice” (p. 202), which implies that its pharmacological effect as a drug has been the most important factor in seducing drinkers. It is true that some people did stress the stimulating effects of coffee and tea, but the first Europeans who encountered the black qahwah considered it a medicine, a digestive; they were more concerned with its effect on their bowels than on their brains or nerves. And coffee was more often seen as an antidote for alcohol than as an intoxicant. It was, as Wolfgang Schivelbusch has stated, “the great soberer.”

Coffee, tea, and cacao opened new spaces for sociability. The houses that specialized in preparing them, usually for men only, competed with taverns but emphasized intellectual activities rather than carousing. Although some monarchs, such as the Ottoman Sultan Murat iv and King Charles ii of England, found coffeehouses to be dens of iniquity and attempted to ban them, their complaints were not that cafés were morally subversive, but rather that they encouraged politically subversive speech and actions. Prussia’s Frederick the Great tried to ban coffee for mercantilist reasons—coffee was so popular that too much currency was leaving the country in the search for imports. Later, the Prohibitionist movement in the u.s. opened coffeehouses to fight alcohol use. But, despite the authors’ contention that caffeine and temperance are related (p. 109), in fact there was little relationship between U.S. coffee consumption and alcohol use. In none of these cases was caffeine banned as a drug.

The religious uses of coffee, tea, and cacao further undercut the notion of the historic attraction of caffeine drinks as a drug. Zen Buddhists were fond of tea because it helped them meditate; the same can be said of the Arabian Sufi Muslims in regard to coffee (they were the first to popularize it). Both groups focused on the otherworldly and on virtue. Schivelbusch calls cacao a Catholic drink because it was favored in southern Europe, especially by the Iberian monarchies that monopolized its New World production. But there seems to have been no religious link between cacao and Catholicism. Some Protestants in the United States, on the other hand, fought against coffee on the grounds that the body is a temple to God and caffeine injures the temple.

A brief section that appears to be an afterthought, “Why Did Caffeine Come When It Came?” posts the arrival of the clock and industrial time in the seventeenth century as having created a need for caffeine. People had to adjust their bodies to industrial demands rather than to the natural rhythms of the sun. Here again the authors suggest that caffeine was important, but now as a soberer rather than as a drug. They even suggest that a “mini-ice age” was responsible for making hot drinks more enticing (p. 127). In this case it is the warmth and safety of a boiled drink in a time of unreliable water supplies that is the attraction.

This argument points to the Eurocentrism, indeed Anglocentrism, of this book. Tea was initially—and still is—primarily an Asian drink. Yet we hear a good deal about English tea drinking and only very little about China, Japan, and India. Perhaps more seriously, Weinberg and Bealer don’t have a sense of when coffee and tea became mass beverages. For instance, Dr. Cornelius Buntekuh “did more than anyone else to promote the general use of both coffee and tea in Europe” (p. 102) by publishing a book in 1679. But as late as 1800 European coffee consumption was only one-quarter pound a year per capita! Tea and cacao were less. A quote on page 119 that discusses “the almost universal use of tea and coffee as articles of diet [in 1833]” is left unquestioned when it is clearly wrong.

Only with the Javanese and, more importantly, American production of coffee (beginning in the 1690s and then the 1720s) did coffee gradually become available for wider consumption. Brazil’s great production beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, based on the use of slave labor, really made caffeine available. So coffee was as much the
drink of bondage as the drink of reason. New products such as the tea bag, canned and instant coffee, and powdered chocolate with sugar were instrumental in spreading caffeine consumption and making their delivery systems more than mere drugs or status symbols; they became beverages. And, as Sidney Mintz has shown, sugar played a central role in making coffee, tea, and chocolate widely popular and converting them from adult male drinks to beverages and foods consumed also by women and children.2

Sugar played a leading part in extending caffeine from the world of the hot drink to the cold drink in the form of soft drinks. Beginning with Coca-Cola, which started out as a pharmacists’ concoction of wine, kola nuts, and coca (from which cocaine is made), soft drinks were domesticated by removing the coca and wine and adding sugar and caffeine. The sharply rising consumption of soft drinks in the U.S. explains much of the decline of coffee drinking.

The second part of The World of Caffeine consists of an overview of recent scientific findings. The authors present this material clearly and concisely, delving into questions the layman wants answered about caffeine’s health effects. As they point out, although caffeine is the most studied of drugs, because its chemistry is complex—it produces more than a dozen metabolites and can be metabolized in a number of different ways—it is still, unfortunately, one of the least understood drugs of all. “The pharmacology of caffeine is both intricate and inconclusive” (p.224). Findings are ambiguous, demonstrating that responses to caffeine vary by sex, age, genetic propensity, state of mind, and diet. In nature, caffeine was developed by plants as a toxic defense against fungi and bacteria. It was intended to prevent consumption. When a NASA experiment set spiders to spinning webs after being intoxicated by various substances, the caffeenated spiders made the most incomplete, awkward webs (which perhaps only leads to the conclusion that spiders shouldn’t drink coffee). In most humans caffeine is a stimulant, but it calms some people. Most people think better after some coffee, but too much scrambles most brains.

Although they are prone to using medical terminology, Weinberg and Bealer present a clear and convincing discussion. Of course, the main conclusion that we still have a lot to learn about caffeine is the most convincing. So many studies exist precisely because they often contradict each other or demonstrate that the nature of the caffeine delivery system and the context within which it is drunk, as well as the size, sex, and age of the consumer, all substantially affect the consequences of caffeine consumption. Although consumers can develop a tolerance for and a dependence on caffeine, there is little evidence that caffeine consumption is physiologically harmful, at least for the great majority of people. Because eighty to ninety percent of all Americans consume caffeine in some form daily, and most people in the world have some form of caffeine delivery system, the world of caffeine is necessarily complex and somewhat confusing. But it is also intriguing and terribly important. The drug masquerades in many guises and has attended the most important achievements of the modern era. We are what we drink, and we are very complicated.

—Steven Topik, University of California, Irvine

NOTES


Dangerous Tastes: The Story of Spices
Andrew Dalby
(California Studies in Food and Culture, vol. 1)
184 pp. Illustrations. $27.50 (cloth)

Andrew Dalby tells us that his primary interest in the story of spices is their role in world globalization. The development of the spice routes along which these amazing aromatics traveled from their lands of origin to eager consumers in other parts of the world began in earliest antiquity and became a vitally important network of connections among peoples and countries. The risks of early travel to remote places and the political rivalries over trade made spices “dangerous tastes.”

In keeping with this theme, Dalby focuses on some sixty spices, chosen for their prominence in world trade, and only mentions others, such as Ethiopian pepper (Xylopia aethiopica), which have not (yet) traveled very far from home. Included here and there among the discussions of individual spices are brief excursions on such topics as “An Eastern crossroads” (the Malay archipelago), “A Western crossroads” (Arabia and the ancient Near East), and “The beginnings of world trade.” Particular spice routes and ports are examined as well. Sadly, although the book has many fine historical illustrations, it fails to provide the maps that would make it so much easier for the reader to follow these routes.

What steals the show from the author’s professed topic of globalization is his stunning command of the ancient and medieval written sources. In his quest for information on spices, Dalby consults, and often quotes from, royal inscriptions of Assyrian kings, Linear B tablets from...
are such world travelers, their story requires a knowledge of plants, both familiar and exotic, both commonplace and others. In this fashion, the book covers a very large number of materials, and organizing it presents something of a problem. Since the spice routes travel around the globe, the usual discussion by region is inadequate; and since the use of these spices survives in many cases from earliest antiquity until modern times. For example, he shows how ginger—Colombine, Valadine and Mai-kine—are named in many sources. Most medieval writers probably did not know what the names meant. As a matter of fact, Maikine ginger was named after Mecca. It is not clear why: this may have been the place where eastern African ginger was marketed. Colombine was named after Quilon or Kollam on the west coast of India. The word Valadine meant originally ‘local’—local to the city of Calicut on the same coast.

This interpretation may be widely accepted by scholars, but not all questions are so generally agreed upon. Dalby refers to only a few disputes, mostly in his footnotes. Especially in his statement that “it is up to the historian to decide whether [ancient texts] are telling the truth,” it would be very interesting to hear more about how he came to his various conclusions.

Dalby is aware of the pitfalls. In his final chapter he discusses some of the difficulties in handling the early history of spices, particularly with regard to their names. Sometimes identifying spices from their names in ancient texts is impossible: the name often changes as the spice travels; or the name stays the same, but the spice it designates changes. Because “[i]t sometimes seems that there are as many spice names as there are speakers of English” (p.8), the book contains an extensive Glossary of Spice Names.

I learned a great deal from this book. I read it with several atlases around me, trying to follow the spices around the planet. Each footnote was duly consulted, and I worked through the appendices searching for full publication data for each book cited. I experimented with some of the recipes. In short, I had a wonderful time. There are only a few minor points where I disagreed with facts presented in this book—things on the order of the statement that annatto “provides a red dye” (p.145). Annatto gives a yellow color, which is why the food industry uses it so often in butter,
margarine, and cheeses. I don’t think *acuyo* leaves are “sassafras-scented” (p.145); to me they smell much like their botanical cousin in the *Piper* genus, black pepper. It would be a pleasure to sort out such questions with Dalby. I’d ask him, too, where he got his information that Columbus saw the tapping of mastic in the Aegean island of Chios (p.150). It is quite reasonable to speculate that Columbus, as a young Genoese sailor, visited that island, then under the control of Genoa and profiting from the mastic produced there—but tell me, please, where is the hard evidence? I’d also love to argue about whether saffron has always been an expensive spice (p.138). It’s the labor-intensive nature of saffron cultivation, harvesting, and processing that makes it cost so much, but sometimes, in some places, labor is cheap. Dalby says in his preface that he expects a few challenges, particularly to his “several assertions of ’the first time’ a certain spice is recorded in use in various parts of the world” (p.7). Dangerous Tastes will surely stimulate a dialogue—whole conversations, in fact—about spices.

After all his painstaking, comprehensive research, Andrew Dalby remains engaged with his subject, excited by the taste and smell of spices, and fascinated by “the people, their ingenuity and their intelligence” (p.158), who are ultimately responsible for the spice trade. In Dangerous Tastes he has enriched the story of spices to the benefit of all with an interest in trade, perfume, medicine, or food.

—Alice Arndt, Author, *Seasoning Savvy*

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**On Right Pleasure and Good Health: A Critical Edition and Translation of De honesta voluptate et valetudine**

Edited and translated by Mary Ella Milham


ix + 511 pp. $35.00 (cloth)

**Libellus de arte coquinaria: An Early Northern Cookery Book**

Edited and translated by Rudolf Grewe and Constance B. Heatt

Tempe, Arizona: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies (vol. 222), 2001

x + 158 pp. $22.00 (cloth)

When Platina’s *De honesta voluptate* was first printed around 1470, it was a runaway success. Several editions immediately followed, and the book was soon translated into Italian. An expanded version appeared in French, and then it was translated into German. Why the world would have to wait another five hundred years for an English translation is not entirely clear. A facsimile of the original with a rough translation by Elizabeth Andrews was, for some strange reason, published by the Mallinkrodt Chemical Works in 1967. But not until Milham’s critical edition of 1998 has there been a reliable version—or rather, two versions, one scholarly and heavily annotated, the other a cheap paperback without the Latin original or critical apparatus (The University of North Carolina at Asheville/Pegasus Press, 1999), a practice that should be more widely imitated. Milham, who has been working on Platina for decades, was the ideal scholar for the task. Her superb introduction unravels a fascinating web of intrigue surrounding the papal court and Platina’s meteoric rise, fall, and reinstatement under Pope Sixtus IV.

*De honesta voluptate* itself is really two books: a Renaissance health manual describing the virtues and lore of individual ingredients, and a late medieval cookbook written by Martino of Como, chef to Cardinal Ludovico Trevisan. The two sections sit together uncomfortably today. Food historians pay attention almost exclusively to the recipes now, but in the late fifteenth century health and cookery were thought to be inextricably intertwined. One could not live well without careful attention to medical rules, nor could one eat well without decent recipes. Platina, an Epicurean in the original sense of that word, was trying to offer his readers a way to truly maximize pleasure by keeping health and aesthetic concerns in careful balance—something we at least pay lip service to today but rarely achieve. Whether Platina’s project was successful or not is a matter for debate, but modern readers will find a wealth of engaging details in his volume, such as why the lentil is “digested with difficulty, generates black bile and creates scaly skin disease, causes flatulence and a stuffed feeling, harms the brain and chest, dulls the eyes, and represses passion” (p.314). We are also taught how to cook a magnificent eel pie that includes almond milk, rosewater, raisins, sugar, and spices. That Platina himself had trouble reconciling the medical with the gastronomic here is evidenced by his added comments: “When it is finally cooked, serve it to your enemies, for it has nothing good in it” (pp.373–75).

What makes this work especially rich is precisely this juxtaposition of erudite classical and medical scholarship with courtly international medieval dishes. It gives us insight into what people of the past thought they should be eating and what they really wanted to eat. Intellectually, the book also lies exactly at the crossroads between medieval and early modern, much like the art and architecture of the day, a curious amalgam of new Renaissance theory with...
older medieval techniques. It makes one think of the work of Paolo Ucello, master of mathematical single-point perspective, who depicted armor-clad knights in the midst of battle.

The only possible drawback of Milham’s translation is that it is not designed for cooks at all. Whether De honesta voluptate was meant to be a working cookbook when originally published one can only speculate, but many readers today will certainly want to try out some of the recipes to get a sense of what they were like. Without thorough familiarity with medieval ingredients and techniques, this book will be of little practical use. There might, at the very least, have been an index to the English translation rather than just a Latin Index Verborum.

In the same series from Arizona is a much earlier cookbook, the Libellus de arte coquinaria, which actually offers four different manuscript versions of what is likely among the earliest medieval works devoted solely to cookery, dating before 1300. Its editors, Constance B. Hieatt and the late Rudolf Grewe, are much more sensitive than Milham to cooking methods, ingredients, and the relation of these texts to other medieval cookbooks. Part III goes into considerable detail in explaining exactly what these recipes would have been like. That said, one would not necessarily choose to cook from this book, either. It is primarily a textual study of the relation of these four manuscripts (two in Danish, one in Icelandic, and one in a low German that is almost readable to speakers of English) to an earlier, probably southern European original. The approximately thirty-five recipes themselves are interesting primarily because they offer a glimpse of elite medieval cuisine that is at once international (note the use of almond milk and spices) but also early enough to be lacking the requisite sugar or dried fruits that play such a prominent role in later medieval cookbooks like Martino’s. It may seem odd that these early recipes should survive only in languages like Icelandic, but as the editors point out, these were copies made in all likelihood by physicians trained in southern Europe, who later brought them back to their noble employers in the North. At the least, the manuscripts attest to the claim that medieval cooking, like Gothic architecture, was truly international. The descendants of all the recipes here—various chicken pies, roasts, the “blancmanger” of chicken breast, almond milk, and sugar, the sauces like “cameline” mustard sauces and green sauce, an early kind of pesto—can be found in later medieval cookbooks as well.

Rather than being an introduction to medieval cooking, then, of which there are several great ones (Scully, The Art of Cookery in the Middle Ages; Santich, The Original Mediterranean Cuisine; Hieatt et al., Pleyn Delit; Redon et al., The Medieval Kitchen), Libellus de arte coquinaria is a very specialized, scholarly study of a relatively unknown early medieval cookbook. It belongs on the shelf of anyone interested in medieval cuisine or of any linguist interested in cooking terms. For the average reader, though, it will provide only a small, savory tidbit.

—Ken Albala, University of the Pacific

Alcohol, Sex, and Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe
A. Lynn Martin
Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2001
x + 200 pp. $59.95 (cloth)

The author, Reader in History at the University of Adelaide, Australia, and an expert on Jesuits in early modern France, has now turned his attention to quite a different topic: drinking behavior and attitudes toward drinking in Italy, France, and England ca. 1300–1700. Because anthropologists have discovered that drinking behavior and drunken comportment are socially mediated, Lynn Martin hopes to gain insights into some late medieval and early modern societies in Europe by studying these phenomena. At the same time, because alcoholic beverages in this part of the world

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Martin’s source material has not been derived from archives, but from modern (i.e. mainly twentieth- and some nineteenth-century) editions of contemporary texts and a lot of rather recent secondary literature. Feminist historians have written about the subordination of women in patriarchal societies and have developed theories about women becoming more weak and tender by the use of alcohol, while men grow violent and aggressive from the same beverages. Other authors, however, have seen hardly any
connection between alcohol and violence and gender relations. So Lynn Martin had to look for his own way between rather different theories, which problem he solved not by formulating a theory of his own, but by giving examples of all kinds of situations and perceptions, as derived from social, economic, legal, and poetic texts.

After the “Introduction” (Ch.1), the following themes are treated: “Women and Alcohol” (Ch.2), concerning the amount of wine or ale or beer consumed in every household as a part of the daily diet of men as well as of women, including a discussion of their nutritional and medicinal functions; “Sex and Alcohol” (Ch.3), concerning contemporary opinion on the procreative effect of alcohol in conception and pregnancy, and excessive drinking at weddings and other ceremonies; “Alehouses, Taverns, and Prostitutes” (Ch.4), on the sociability of outdoor drinking and the fact that single women in taverns were supposed to be, and in fact often were, seeking clients (although, curiously enough and unexplained, in England women were more normally accepted in taverns than in France and Italy); “Sexual Encounters” (Ch.5), concerning the temptations of meeting places such as alehouses for illicit sex, with or without the consent of both parties, and also touching on the risk of impotence; “Unruly Women and Violent Men” (Ch.6), on the cultural construction in literature of women who gathered in taverns as an act of rebellion against their husbands (in contrast, men who acted violently towards women under the influence of alcohol hardly constituted a literary topic, as actual male violence linked with drinking was caused by gambling, not by women); “Husbands and Wives” (Ch.7), on drinking husbands who brought their wives and children to poverty, and sober wives who beat their drunken husbands in response; and “Conclusions” (Ch.8), offering general insights gleaned from the many examples provided in the preceding chapters.

The author begins his conclusions by remarking that traditional Europe had a double standard in sexual behavior as well as in drinking. Men had more freedom than women in both these activities. Nevertheless, he concludes from his source material that warnings against excessive drinking addressed men more often than women and that “beliefs about the erotic effects of drink demonstrated a single standard rather than a double standard” (p.136). As for the wasting of money and time in taverns by unruly women—a male literary construction—he observes that the reverse—men wasting their family income on alcohol while their wives and children suffered at home—was also a male construction, and one that came into the picture more frequently, so that “[t]he male construction of male drinking behavior indicted men more often than women” (p.137). Excessive drinking and its consequences for the society at large as an undermining factor of the patriarchal family sometimes led to restrictive laws and regulations, with the effect “that men faced prosecution and punishment more than did women” (p.139). Quite at the end of his book the author confesses that in the beginning he expected to find a difference between the Roman Catholic south of Europe and the Protestant north, as well as between ale- or beer-drinking areas and wine-producing areas; but in vain: The differences of contemporary opinion on the connection between alcohol and sex turned out to be minimal.

The obviousness of Martin’s conclusions did not always leap to my eye, because the many examples given are mainly not discussed as to their real content and consequences, and therefore they may be interpreted in different ways. Also, because Martin has deliberately left out their historical context (in order not to enlarge his book needlessly), we are driven from Italy to France and England back and through the four centuries that are studied, without being able to realize how representative his examples really are and whether some cases might prove the contrary. I would have preferred a more systematic discussion with differentiation of time, place, and historical context; but perhaps this is a question of taste that will not be shared by other readers. At any rate, the author has collected a lot of useful material on an interesting topic, which may stimulate further research.

—Johanna Maria van Winter, Utrecht, The Netherlands

Tradewinds & Coconuts: A Reminiscence & Recipes from the Pacific Islands
Jennifer Brennan
Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 2000
xx +304 pp. Illustrations. $34.95 (cloth)

The South Pacific is a dream destination for many—“The easy, relaxed lifestyles, the friendly and outgoing peoples, their feasts and festivals, the fruits and flowers, the bounty of freshly caught seafood, the stunning beauty of the islands and the Pacific Ocean itself” (p.xv)—and Tradewinds & Coconuts will transport you there from your armchair.

Through zesty writing, Jennifer Brennan captures years of travel to remote places and offers a vivid, picturesque tour of Oceania—Melanesia, Micronesia, Polynesia, and Australasia. Her book overflows with reminiscences, history, geography, and cultural tidbits that make for delicious and dreamy reading. There is plenty of good information to be gleaned from the text and especially from the author’s
“eclectic glossary,” which is vital to the book. The author’s own expertly crafted illustrations give realistic images of the subject matter, whether a food item or scene, and add another likeable dimension to this book.

As the “definitive volume on Pacific Island cooking” (inside front jacket), however, Brennan’s book does not accomplish what she set out to do: “to capture the basics of the island cuisines before they disappeared under the deluge of fast food franchises” (p.xiv). First, it is difficult to differentiate between traditional, authentic recipes and those that reflect contemporary influences, of which there appear to be many. While in some instances Brennan thoroughly describes an authentic cooking ritual—as in her discussion of pit roasting—in others, such as Kalua Pork in Your Oven, she embellishes “island cuisine” with contemporary ingredients and preparations. Kalua Pork is traditionally made with pork, salt, and liquid smoke, but Brennan’s addition of soy, Worcestershire, garlic, ginger, and oil seems like overkill for a simple dish. Contemporary embellishments are not altogether a bad thing: the cuisine of the South Pacific is certainly evolving with the globalization of the world, and its simplicity may warrant additional ingredients for flavor. But distinguishing among the traditional, the contemporary, and the recreated seems critical for the unexplored territory that the author is defining.

As Brennan points out, the cuisine of Oceania is based on similar ingredients used throughout a vast area. But because of the organization of the book, the reader does not get a sense for differences in the preparation of common ingredients among the areas of Oceania. And there are differences. Fiji’s feast table would no doubt include East Indian dishes, while the Spanish legacy in Guam, the French and Chinese in Tahiti, and the Filipino influence on the table of the Marianas are, I think, important in distinguishing the vast food culture of the Pacific Islands.

Further, I object to the ordering of recipes “using Western meal component labels” (p.8). Brennan states that “Because of the different cultural approaches to eating and cooking there are, inevitably, island dishes that defy Western categorization” (p.8). Indeed, one cannot assume that dishes are salads or desserts within a different cultural context. For example, is shrimp kelaguen, a dish of shrimp and coconut served cold or at room temperature, really a salad, or one of many dishes presented on the table of Guam? Likewise, Poke Aku, noted in the salad chapter, is consumed mainly as a pupu (hors d’oeuvre) in Hawaii alongside chilled beer.

The book is written with the Western cook in mind and the consequent local availability of ingredients. In some of the recipes, traditional ingredients that are difficult to find, like kangaroo or turtle meat, are called for without any suggestions for substitutes. In others, where the traditional ingredient may be more readily available, substitutions are called for at the outset of the recipe, again pointing to inconsistencies between authentic, as opposed to contemporary, recipes.

On first reading, several issues stood out in regard to the information on Hawaii, a region whose food culture and history have been fairly well documented. For instance, Brennan states that purple taro is “becoming popular in Hawaii” (p.63). In fact, although bun long or Chinese taro has a purple cast, rarely is it a “show stopper,” as purple sweet potatoes are. Elsewhere, Brennan uses the term “alae” in reference to “alaea,” an ocherous substance used to color sea salt. According to Pukui and Elbert’s Hawaiian Dictionary, “alae” is the word for “mudhen.” Brennan’s recipe for Kamano lomi (salt salmon, tomatoes, and onions, long popular in the islands) is authentic enough. But to call it anything but lomi salmon defies convention, even though kamano is the proper word for “salmon.” Finally, two dia-critical marks that the Hawaiian language uses sometimes change the meaning of words; they are important and should be used either consistently or not at all. The author (or more likely the publisher) has chosen to ignore one of the two essential marks, a small but sensitive point.

Finer points aside, Tradewinds & Coconuts cannot be disregarded for its insight into the foods of Oceania and its often thorough information about the ingredients of this vast region. Mainly it is a book to be savored for its colorful writing, which carries the reader to an idyllic world that continues to celebrate the simplicity of fresh foods.

—Joan Namkoong, Honolulu, HI

Bread of Three Rivers: The Story of a French Loaf
Sara Mansfield Taber
Boston: Beacon Press, 2001
242 pp. $24.00 (cloth)

Bread of Three Rivers is a narrative quest with some of the innocence of a fairy tale. The author, exiled from both her academic life and her old Minnesota community, finds herself full-time mothering and pining for good bread. Newly arrived in Washington, D.C., she is unable to find bread that satisfies her craving, and she gives up trying to make her own after a couple of halfhearted attempts. It is in this context that she revives her love of France and French culture and begins to fantasize about a perfect French baguette.

As her obsession with “a French loaf” grows, she conceives of the idea to go to France, find a representative loaf,
and learn both the secrets of its manufacture and the origins of each of its elements. This pursuit provides the structure and subject of the book. Chapter by chapter, several trips to France explore each ingredient and worker, from baker to salt harvester to wheat grower to water commissioner to yeast factory.

There are a number of problems with this approach—it’s almost inevitably plodding and formulaic. In the manner of a social-science research paper, each artisan is asked the same series of questions about their food product and their attitudes towards their job: “And do you like your life?” I asked, turning the conversation from the crop to the man” (p.144).

Even more problematic than this approach to work, however, is the author’s naiveté about her subject. Somehow, in spite of her great interest in bread, Taber has failed to learn very much about it prior to her trip to France. For instance, it’s only after speaking with her representative baker, Monsieur Choquet, that she learns about retarding bread dough to increase flavor by chilling the dough to slow its rise. This is an extraordinary level of innocence for a passionate bread head—even some mass-market bread-machine cookbooks discuss this practice, as does every single serious book about bread making in the European tradition.

Similarly, she does not know about poolish (fermented dough), or that many different bread shapes are made from the same dough. Most disconcerting is that the author seems unaware of the artisanal bread movement in the United States. These craftsman/bakers have created so many pockets of good bread all across the country that she could have done her research much closer to home if she’d wished to. Given all these omissions, one is forced to conclude that the impetus for this book is less about bread than it is about France.

And, in fact, it is a very special picture of France, one that owes a great deal to visual images like Millet’s Gleaners, or photographs of beret-topped Frenchmen perched on bicycles with baguettes wedged under an arm. It is an American’s France of the mind, and it is a place where labor is dignified, workers wear smocks, everyone eats the finest local foods, and life has both a leisurely pace and meaning. It is this romantic, idealized version of an imaginary France that propels the quest and gives rise to sentences like this: “I now had in my mind a multifaceted picture of Monsieur Choquet, the baker. He was a thinker, a commander, a craftsman and also an alchemist, a presider over mysteries” (p.58). A little later Taber writes, “Monsieur Choquet worked magic, and his bread had fulfilled my dreams. I had found my loaf” (p.60).

Such idealized visions inevitably produce letdowns, and eventually the author is forced to concede the gap between her assumptions and reality. For example, several of her respondents have tried to alert her to the dying nature of the independent boulanger. When a shopkeeper near the salt fields in Brittany tells her plainly, “today in France, only people truly interested in good food buy non-supermarket bread” (p.104), she finally gets it.

So, like any hero, Taber ends her quest sadder and wiser than she started, admitting that “romance based on ignorance and fantasy and unconscious prejudice is not as satisfying or rich as romance grounded in the truth” (p.232).

However, while Taber may have found both her truth and her loaf, the reader cannot. In spite of the fact that M. Choquet produces thirty-five different breads daily, we are never given a recipe for a single one of them. And although we learn a great deal about each of the ingredients in a loaf of bread, and an equal amount about the people who produce each of those ingredients, we are never taught the actual techniques of making a traditional loaf. For the reader, Bread of Three Rivers remains a fantasy loaf.

—Deborah Krasner, Putney, vt

Food and Drink in Literature: A Selectively Annotated Bibliography

Norman Kiell
361 pp. $85.00 (cloth)

Norman Kiell, a professor emeritus of Psychology and now retired from private practice, notes in his introduction that “This is the first full-length annotated bibliography on the twin subjects of food and drink in literature . . .” (p.3). The bibliography grew out of an article published in a special issue on food and drink in Mosaic 24 (no.3/4 1991) and includes works written through 1993, with a few entries from 1994. It is divided into two sections, each with its own introductory material.

The first section on food in literature comprises about two-thirds of the bibliography and is wide-ranging and eclectic. As Kiell notes, “No aspect of eating or drinking is omitted in the works listed. They range from anorexia to cannibalism, from fine dining to dieting, . . . from starvation to gluttony” (pp.5–6). Most entries are annotated, though the glosses vary in length, usefulness, and complexity. A number of glosses refer to a piece of literature without mentioning the author, which is problematic for readers who do not have an extensive background in literature.
A majority of the books and articles are about English, French, American, and German writers, but authors of more than twenty countries are included, providing a valuable comparative resource for anyone interested in representations of food in literature. Some literary works and authors have multiple entries on both the food in the works of a given author and an analysis of an author’s relationship to food in his or her life. Authors with multiple entries include Dickens, Shakespeare, Proust, and Joyce. Faulkner, Austen, Montaigne, Balzac, Woolf, Rabelais, Zola, and Swift are also well represented. There are a number of entries on food in the lives and writings of southern women and on food in detective and mystery fiction.

The numerous books and articles analyzing representations of cannibalism, anorexia, and bulimia in literature are clearly of interest to psychologists, but also provide a new perspective for food historians, anthropologists, and students of literature who might well be unaware of this body of information.

A number of entries are purely historical or anthropological in nature. These do not appear on the surface to be relevant, and one wonders, for instance, why one work of anthropologist Marvin Harris is included but not his others on the same theme. The entries on food history seem to indicate that Kiell has little familiarity with this literature. He cites gastronome Grimod de la Reynière as Grimond, the Viandier of Taillevent as the Viantier, and the noted medievalist Terence Scully is listed under Sully. The cookbook of Apicius in Latin appears under Apicus, while all but one of the translations into English are listed under the name of the translator, the exception being the translation by Joseph Dommers Vebling, which appears under Apicius as Joseph Dommers and also under Vebling.

In the introduction to the second section of the bibliography Kiell speaks of the destructive nature of alcoholism. This sets the tone for this section, which is not on alcohol, but alcoholism in literature and alcohol’s effects on the lives of writers. What is not included, with very few exceptions, are entries on the pleasures and conviviality of wine, alcohol, and drinking in literature. There are numerous entries on articles and books about creativity and alcoholism, on how alcohol and alcoholism are portrayed in movies and on television, and on alcoholism in the lives of writers such as Berryman, Hemingway, London, etc. As with the section on food, perhaps more so, there are many entries that are psychoanalytic in nature, and the glosses in this section can at times be a bit moralizing.

The index would be more useful if it included the authors and literary works that are the subject of the books and articles in the bibliography. There are close to forty entries on Charles Dickens, but Dickens is not listed in the index. Thematic entries such as anorexia, food and drink in southern women’s fiction, creativity and alcoholism, etc. should also be listed.

This bibliography is of value to anyone interested in food and drink in literature. There are little gems throughout, and while Kiell’s definition of literature is overly broad, there is something here for everyone. A more careful editing of future editions and a well-constructed index would render this a more valuable resource.

—Pat Kelly, North Shore Community College

The Professional Chef, 7th edition
The Culinary Institute of America
New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2002
1036 pp. Illustrations. $65.00 (cloth)

Most serious home cooks and armchair chefs covet reference cookbooks that reveal secrets of the kitchen while simultaneously inspiring the exploration of new gastronomic territory. Such books are often well-used tomes, dog-eared and dirty from greasy, loving hands. For professional chefs, however, a reliable reference book is more than a friend in the kitchen; it is a lifeline that helps them manage the business of cooking. Chefs need more than inspiration and guidance; the hard realities of their profession require a sound knowledge of the less glamorous aspects of food preparation, such as cost effectiveness, food safety, and facility management.

To aid and abet chefs with the intimidating as well as the artistic dimensions of restaurant and institutional cooking, The Culinary Institute of America, the country’s leading chef-training school, has recently published the seventh edition of its classic text, The Professional Chef. The scope and depth of this tome present a clear view of the real challenges of cooking for institutions and restaurants. If, as an accomplished and proud home cook, you have fantasized that you might more accurately be labeled a “chef,” this textbook will quickly disabuse you of that notion.

Building on the success of its predecessor, the 1996 edition entitled The New Professional Chef, this current work offers much of the same encyclopedic coverage of the nuts and bolts of large-volume cooking in the food-service industry, along with updated material on contemporary cooking concepts, nutrition, food science, and recipe trends. A highly detailed guide to food-borne illnesses and the sanitary conditions necessary to avoid them is invaluable information for all chefs, as is the section on kitchen safety.
The nutrition chapter is especially thorough, with its inclusion of vegetarian and vegan food pyramids. For instance, a footnote regarding the importance of soy milk being fortified, and the mention of the need for tofu to contain calcium sulfate rather than magnesium sulfate for the tofu to be a good source of calcium, offer precise and valuable information. The bottom line for all professional food establishments is profit, and any chef ill-equipped to deal with the financial dimensions of the business is doomed. Thus the chapter entitled “Introduction to the Profession” is indispensable for its guidance on such matters as calculating and converting recipes, computing the edible portion cost, and managing human resources and time.

Though this essential text is noteworthy for the useful business information it provides, the bulk of the book is devoted to classical French cooking techniques and recipes. From braising lamb shanks to rolling omelets to whipping up Italian buttercreams, we are taken through the procedures with useful tips and lavish, exquisite photographs. The basics of making stock, filleting fish, roasting peppers, and cooking French fries are as beautifully illustrated as more elaborate creations such as salmon mousse, spinach souffle, and coated truffles.

The assumption in The Professional Chef is that these are recipes that chefs will be concocting for their patrons. The quantities are generally intended for serving large groups (soup, for example, is made by the gallon); however, many of the recipes are for ten portions, manageable for a dinner party or easily halved for the average family. So the question remains, is this teaching manual useful for the serious home cook? Because the measurements are metric (that is, the weight, rather than volume, of flour, eggs, and sugar is given), a kitchen scale is needed to follow the recipes accurately. With scale in hand, the home cook can take full advantage of all this book has to offer—its reference material and its collection of enticing recipes.

The new design of The Professional Chef is sleek and graceful in comparison to the previous edition. The lustrous paper on which the book is printed will make you want to protect the pages from kitchen grease—a somewhat impractical challenge with a textbook—but the aesthetic gains from the choice of glossy paper make it a good design choice nonetheless. The stylish, minimalist layout is uncluttered and attractive; however, the use of a small type font makes the text in this edition a little harder to read.

Aside from a few errors, such as the mislabeling of Bosc and D’Anjou pears and the incorrect description of Yukon Gold potatoes (they do not sometimes have red skin and are a different cultivar from Yellow Finn potatoes), The Professional Chef is a painstakingly crafted manual that will become a bible in the kitchens of most professional chefs. And rightly so.

—Jeanne Lemlin, Author, Vegetarian Classics

Bookends

Secrets of the Tsil Café: A Novel with Recipes
Thomas Fox Averill
New York: BlueHen Books, 2001
304 pp. $23.95 (cloth)

Food is both context and protagonist in this richly layered first novel. This is not just the food of ordinary tables, however, but dishes that have been painstakingly crafted with ingredients indigenous to the New World—eclectic and exquisite. Food serves here as a metaphor for insight and life and love.

The novel begins with Robert Hingler releasing the pungency and color of achiote seeds by roasting them in corn oil at his restaurant, which is dedicated to authentic pre-Columbian ingredients. Hingler is the father of narrator Weston Tito Hingler; his wife, Maria, is also a cook. Maria interprets traditional Mediterranean dishes for the successful catering business she runs from a separate kitchen in the family home. In the totemic shadow of the tsil—the Hopi Indian name for chile pepper—the contrasts between father and mother introduce the conflicts young Wes faces as he ripens to maturity.

The story is, on the surface, a coming-of-age tale, in which Wes’s poignant, often hilarious, experiences with food parallel the lessons he learns about life. Thomas Fox Averill, a professor of English at Washburn University, writes with fine detail; his descriptions of the ingredients are especially strong. Each recipe includes detailed historical references, and even the cooking instructions are personal: “Salt to taste. Eat with reverence” (p.174).

However, Averill assaults the reader with too many complex layers of character and plot. It is hard to accept that so many twists in relationships and personal secrets could converge in a single family. Just as Robert Hingler adds one ingredient after another to compose a signature dish, Averill makes sure that all the stories behind the characters are told. He is a masterful storyteller, but a more seasoned novelist might have saved some details for a future book.

Culinary historians will relish Robert Hingler’s fiftieth-birthday feast of pre-Columbian delicacies including Incan
earliest days of collecting clusters of Olympias from exposed rocks to the present cultivation advancement in state-of-the-art shellfish hatcheries and bioengineered broodstock.

The narrative that became Heaven on the Half Shell: The Story of the Northwest’s Love Affair with the Oyster started with four leather-bound scrapbooks of newspaper clippings and other print memorabilia that had been collected and preserved by Earl Brenner of Olympia, Washington, during his sixty-year career as an oyster grower. When the authors studied the scrapbooks, which had been donated to the University of Washington, they became convinced that only an intense effort to acquire more documents and to interview survivors of other pioneering oyster farmers could prevent important aspects of the Pacific Northwest’s most prolific industry from being lost. From a campaign to solicit funding for the project and a concerted effort to collect old photographs, can labels, and restaurant menus, to an elaborately planned luncheon for senior oyster growers from historic growing communities, the authors enlisted the cooperation and gathered the memories of third-, fourth-, and fifth-generation oystermen still working the shoreline plots deeded to their ancestors.

The result is not only an impressive history of the transition from collecting to cultivating the world’s most fascinating bivalve and the evolution of U.S. aquaculture, but also a well-documented study of the depletion and rebirth of the Olympia oyster—the only species indigenous to the area—and the importation of both the Atlantic oyster from the East Coast and the large Pacific oyster from Japan to satisfy the population’s craving for this legendary shellfish.

But the oyster can never be merely the subject of history as we know it—dates, methods, charts, statistics, causes and their effects. The oyster is “eating the sea, that’s it!” as Eleanor Clark wrote in that other classic history of oystering, The Oysters of Locmariouar. Serendipitously, the authors of this book have understood that the oyster is, above all, “heaven on the half shell,” and they have added eighteen tried-and-true as well as contemporary recipes to this lively study of oystering in the Pacific Northwest.

Scrapbooks, early and late photographs, oral history, aquaculture, science, economics, geography, and oceanographic expertise are all here, but they blend with homespun, folkloric, community, and culinary interests to entice a broad spectrum of readers. Not just for oyster aficionados, this book is a manual of style for introducing passion into culinary history.

—Joan Reardon, Author, Oysters: A Culinary Celebration