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Pasta: The Story of a Universal Food
Silvano Serventi and Françoise Sabban
New York: Columbia University Press, 2002
xxi + 439 pp. Illustrations

Endeavoring to describe a food product, such as pasta, which has enjoyed universal popularity for thousands of years, is a daunting undertaking. Most information available to scholars is derived from popular tradition, and very little of it comes with precise dates or the means to verify it. Noodles in Asia made of various grains most likely precede by centuries those made in the Mediterranean. In Italy, the regions of Sicily, Campania, Liguria, and Emilia-Romagna compete for bragging rights as to which has the most venerable pasta tradition. Silvano Serventi and Françoise Sabban, authors of Pasta: The Story of a Universal Food, lean toward Sicily and suggest that the contribution of Sardinia is underappreciated. This is but one of hundreds of assertions that seem plausible, or at least possible, but an informed reader might find many things to doubt.

The authors’ findings and opinions are obviously based on a considerable amount of research and deduction, and it seems that every snippet they came across found its way into these pages. Traversing this book’s vast landscape is like wandering through a museum full of hidden galleries and private collections. The treasures are all there, but they do not necessarily relate to one another. Nonetheless, anyone who cares about pasta (which is to say, anyone who eats) will find a great deal of fascinating material to savor. This book is catnip for history buffs.

More’s the pity, then, that its ideas and facts seldom join to create a thesis, but rather seem to make cameo appearances before fading away. The problem is two-tiered. First, the original Italian-language version of this book (La Pasta: Storia e cultura di un cibo universale, Laterza, 2000) suffered from chunky, unlyrical writing that made the information hard to digest. This raw material must have presented obstacles for Antony Shugaar, the translator for the American edition. He had to contend with sixty-word sentences full of information, clauses, and conflicting issues. In Italian these sentences are ungainly; in English they are exhausting. For example:

While the circumstances of the tithing are pretty clear where ordinary bread, leavened or unleavened, is concerned, the commentators on the Talmud are in disagreement on what should be done when the dough is not going to be used for a loaf of normal baked bread, in cases in which, for instance, the dough is enriched with other ingredients (honey, milk, etc.) or subjected to boiling in water. (p. 20)
The authors and translator get off to a rough start in their “Note Concerning a Definition of Pasta Products”:

“Pasta products” are understood to be the end product of a series of technical operations (on a domestic, artisanal, or industrial scale) applied to a mixture of soft wheat flour or durum wheat semolina with water or other substances, more or less liquid, making it possible to obtain a kneaded dough that is subsequently cut into small regular shapes, which are then cooked in a moist environment. This series of technical operations includes a mixing of ingredients, kneading the resulting dough, cutting it into pieces, shaping them, possibly drying them, and possibly storing them. The pasta shapes are then boiled, poached, or steamed. (p.xvii)

Reading this in Italian or in translation, it is apparent that it is an acceptable definition for Italian pasta. Yet the authors make it clear that a whole category of grains that were combined with liquids and then cut existed long ago in China under the general name of bing. The English-language reader takes pasta to mean the Italian product (particularly because this book comes from Italy) and would hope to find different words for products from elsewhere. These do appear, but then fall under that catch-all phrase, pasta, which does not correctly describe the numerous grain-and-water doughs that are transformed into noodles in Asia, Africa, and northern Europe. It was also a poor choice to often translate pasta as “paste” rather than “dough,” as in lavori di pasta (“creations in paste”), or to allow Libro delle paste to become Book of pastes rather than Book of pastas (p.38). The Garzanti Italian-English dictionary translates “pasta” as “1. dough, 2. pasta, 3. paste, 4. pastry,” with the third definition having basically lost its alimentary connotation.

The authors, too, are often unhelpful in terms of clarity and consistency. After saying that there was pasta in China long before Europe, we are told that “Europeans invented pasta late, even though conditions favored them” (p.4). One cannot invent something that already exists.

The narrative becomes more assured when recent history is explored, obviously because there was more documentation available, so that less conjecture was required. Their descriptions of the gradual mechanization of pasta production in Italy and elsewhere are exciting. Interesting too are the chapters examining how local tastes have influenced the way pasta is sauced and served. Perhaps most intriguing is the authors’ lengthy study of “pasta products” in China, a nation that justifiably claims to be pasta’s other homeland.

Ultimately, Pasta: The Story of a Universal Food should not be considered definitive. It does, however, offer much to enjoy as well as question, providing stimuli for more thought and study of a food that is so universal that it eludes easy description.

—Fred Plotkin, New York, NY

Feast and Folly: Cuisine, Intoxication, and the Poetics of the Sublime
Allen S. Weiss
New York: SUNY Press, 2002
157 pp. $44.50 (cloth)

Allen Weiss, a professor of Performance and Cinema Studies at New York University, has written a difficult, sometimes indigestible book, which may nevertheless be the most serious, most compelling, and at the same time the most amusing inquiry into the aesthetics of gastronomy that has been written in recent times. The difficulty arises out of the seriousness with which Weiss seeks to lend to gastronomy a certain philosophical distinction, the distinctness of a fully warranted, independent aesthetic domain, with its inherent history, its codes, and its pure judgments of taste, to speak like Kant, which Weiss often does. Weiss writes: “The present study is neither a history or a sociology of Modern French cuisine, but rather an explanation of the conceptual preconditions, the discursive limits, and the poetic and rhetorical forms of the culinary imagination” (p.13). Weiss wants to do for the culinary imagination what Kant does, in the Critique of Judgment, for the more broadly aesthetic one. His aim in defining the preconditions and determining the limits of what a certain modernist art might call culinary invention (p.90) is not merely typological, but seeks to raise the theorization of cuisine to the status of a full-blown theory of art, one in which Gasteria not only takes her tenth place among the Muses but also transforms their domains. Such bold ambition in a book on cooking is rare indeed. It entails, to quote a piece of Weiss’s gritty jargon, “transforming the aestheticization of the senses and eliminating the previously held limits between the arts.”

In remarkable, dense chapters devoted to the philosophy of drunkenness, to the unfigurability of squid, and to the ideology of pot au feu—or to the conceptual implications of the difference between dill and fennel—Weiss seeks to discover the metaphysical premises implicit in French cuisine. Every cuisine, he argues, has its own philosophy; the French have mobilized their theory of cuisine to produce the most “extreme psychological and metaphysical condition of the aesthetic domain, the sublime, in relation to gastronomy” (p.13). By combining heterogeneous sensations and creating