Even for those who have tried making baguettes without first having booked a seat on the Concorde to Paris, this book is a must read. “It is about cooking old roosters in red wine; about making blood sausage in southwest France, lobster rolls in Greenwich Village, and bread in Rome; about growing vegetables in California and enjoying vegetables in Paris; about eating a wide swath through Thailand and sacrificing everything to make the perfect pizza. It’s about the taste of salt and the taste of steak. It’s about the mind-body problem. And about the elemental, primordial glee we feel every time we are called to dinner” (p.8).

Steingarten’s methods may seem slightly, well, obsessive. For example, researching that taste of salt: “My first step was to buy a pocket-sized electronic scale capable of weighing one-thousandth of a gram, the kind of scale you might find in a major drug deal in, say, the Everglades. Next, I took thirteen different kinds of salt from my pantry, packaged them up, and sent them off to the AmTest laboratory near Seattle for the most minute analysis. And then, I reserved a seat on the next day’s flight to Palermo, Sicily” (p.65). Although the book is a collection of short essays, there are occasional recipes that either incite the reader to rush to the kitchen (Alain Ducasse’s doughnuts), or to rob a bank (a fresh truffle sandwich: “Cut the truffle into slices, about 1/2 to the inch”).

It isn’t that Steingarten doesn’t have a foot in the real world. He lines up for restaurants along with the rest of us (although, being a New Yorker, he waits “on line” while the rest of us wait “in line”). We, however, even in the most frustrating restaurant line, do not consider phoning in a sarin gas scare. We also do not make sport of intimidating those around us: “The couple ahead of us live in Colorado. They have read about typical New Yorkers who insult innocent tourists, but they have never experienced one, and they seem truly appreciative. For them it is like visiting the Statue of Liberty” (p.172).

Bubbling below the surface of this collection are two themes: 1) a public-service campaign “to coax and, if necessary, humiliate people who hold on to phony allergies, bogus intolerances, nutritional nonsense, and provincial preferences” (p.4); and 2) a boundless fury in regard to the traditional Weber barbecue grill (“how any self-respecting corporation can manufacture a grill that does not allow you to raise and lower either the grid or the coals…” (p.47)). Steingarten also disdains “news-borne illnesses,” such as salt scares and msg (“Why Doesn’t Everyone in China Have a Headache?” [p.91]).

After Steingarten breaks his ankle on a tree-lined Manhattan sidewalk, he is confined to bed. (He claims this occurred out of the blue after a meal at a Chinese restaurant, yet one suspects the Colorado couple.) Mail becomes very important when one is bedridden, but things are different in the Steingarten loft. Very different. Along with the obligatory book proofs, there is a fax reporting the winners of the Grand Prix de la Baguette, a couple of new food magazines, invitations to charity wine events, hotel invites from Hawaii (several), restaurant openings (many), an invitation to the hundredth anniversary of Jell-O with Bill Cosby, offers to judge the World Championship of BBQ, stacks of sample books, bakers bringing bread, and Starbucks and Ben and Jerry’s sending ice cream. Yet I actually feel his pain when he has to reschedule lunch in Paris at Taillevent with Ruth Reichl and Marion Cunningham.

Perhaps we forgive Steingarten because he is not a snob. He loves Fritos, Donettes, “fun size” Milky Way bars, M&Ms, Good& Plenty candy, Oreos, and Krispy Kreme doughnuts. He is not a wimp—he spares us no detail of slaughtering a pig—and he revels in standing in the warm dirt at the Chino Farms vegetable stand.

Steingarten says that “Whenever I have nothing better to do, I roast a chicken” (p.36). When I have nothing better to do, I’d like to browse through his mail. But I’ll settle for his book. After a spectacular meal at Alain Passard’s L’Arpège in Paris, Steingarten notes that “The food was stunning, original, precise, provocative, and very delicious. These are the five things we ask of modern cooking, aren’t they?” (p.401). They’re also the very things we ask of the best writing on food.

—Jennifer Judkins, University of California, Los Angeles

Restaurant Empire
Enlight Software, 2003
$29.99

Many food lovers daydream about opening a restaurant, but the financial and physical realities of doing so keep the dream firmly in the fantasy realm for most people. For those of us who won’t quit our day jobs, Enlight Software has attempted to capture the restaurant ownership experience with Restaurant Empire.