Pierre Gagnaire: Reflections on Culinary Artistry
Pierre Gagnaire with Bénédict Beaugé, Jean-Louis Bloch-Lainé, Marianne Comolli, Yan Pennor’s, and François Simon

Camembert: A National Myth
Pierre Boisard, translated by Richard Miller

Manly Meals and Mom’s Home Cooking: Cookbooks and Gender in Modern America
Jessamyn Neuhaus

Selling Mrs. Consumer: Christine Frederick and the Rise of Household Efficiency
Janice Williams Rutherford

The Contented Poacher: Tales and Recipes from an Epicure in the Wilderness
Elantu V. Veovode

Dining at the Lineman’s Shack
John Weston

The Marriage of the Sea
Jane Alison

The Book of Salt
Monique Truong

How We Eat: Appetite, Culture, and the Psychology of Food
Leon Rappaport

Exploring the Tomato: Transformation of Nature, Society, and Economy
Mark Harvey, Steve Quilley, and Hue Beynon

The Chef’s Companion
Elizabeth Riedl

The Edible Tao: Munching My Way toward Enlightenment
Ruth Pennington Paget

Pierre Gagnaire, arguably the most exciting chef in Paris, has produced a startling book that discards convention in favor of honesty. For once a three-star chef has written a coffee-table book with no pretense that anyone is going to try reproducing his dishes at home. It’s a cookbook without guilt: a cookbook without recipes.

Thus, Reflections on Culinary Artistry is to be admired for what it is not. What’s less clear is the merit of what this book is.

It still looks like a cookbook, though the hundred full-page color photographs are of ingredients glistening and transparent—hints and teas—rather than finished dishes. Facing each is a single paragraph of Gagnaire’s musings on the cuisine at hand.

Instead of revealing how he makes a dish, Gagnaire describes how he thinks about it, its inspiration and its development. Yet even that sounds too concrete. These paragraphs are prose poems, reminiscences, even confessions—for two photographs in a row Gagnaire admits he’s forgotten the dishes, doesn’t even recognize the ingredients.

The chef strikes an independent position from the beginning. The opening pages leap right into “Sweets,” and not until 120 pages later does Gagnaire begin to present “Savories.” Yet even in sweets he tosses in savory surprises—an orange tuile waiting for a langoustine.

And from the first paragraph you begin to catch this chef’s mood, his style. Sometimes his ideas are soap bubbles that collapse when you try to capture them. Others are clear and solid: “I like apple tarts to be a little battered, a little sloppy, but so good, so sincere” (p. 6). And “I mistrust flowers in cuisines” (p.16).

Slowly, paragraph by paragraph, Gagnaire’s passion builds momentum and leaps to spark the reader’s equivalent response. “I spend my life watching ingredients,” he writes, “waiting for them to surrender at the peak of their maturity. I am in tune with them. I observe” (p.86). He points to his combination of cèpes, small clams, and leaves of epilobe. There are only two or three weeks in the year when this encounter is possible, reminds Gagnaire, and it is that scarceness that “raises an unexceptional dish to magical” (p.202). Likewise, Gagnaire labels gooseberries “gastronomical phantoms” because they’re here and gone in a mere week or two, during which he sautés them in olive oil and serves them on a pool of avocado cream.
The vocabulary here is subtle, gentle. Gagnaire’s favorite word is “peacefully.” Even the cooking, the little that is described, is slow, done at low temperature.

The photos and text represent Gagnaire’s ideas in a contrapuntal poetry. A Victoria pineapple, scored and roasted with vanilla beans and sugar, looks so moist with caramelization that you’re tempted to swipe a taste with your finger. Then you read Gagnaire’s description of the pineapple “parading nonchalantly, as if it just came out of its hammock” (p. 26). The whimsical image of a gently swaying pineapple, on vacation, creeps into one’s mind. Who needs the workaday intrusion of a recipe?

Besides, if you keep alert you can pick up trucs and ideas for your own cooking. You might make yourself a note to try chocolate with celery confit or with caramel and artichokes. You learn to intensify the bitterness of orange juice as an ingredient by including a few seeds in the juice extractor. But then you might wonder what to actually do with a combination of pumpkin, carrot juice, parmesan, and pumpkin seeds. “The ingredients and pictures do not give away a recipe, only a trail,” warns Gagnaire. You betcha.

Between the sweet and the savory chapters is a meaty sixteen-page “Discussion on the Cuisine of Pierre Gagnaire” by food writer Bénédict Beaugé, plus thirteen sample menus. Beaugé describes Gagnaire’s as a breakaway cuisine, with “unbelievable associations of flavors and textures” (p. 109). “Who before him has dared to combine bass with celery confit or with caramel and artichokes?” (p. 113). (A wag might answer with a sigh of relief that Gagnaire offers no recipes.) Enhancing those juxtapositions is a layering of ingredients that hides them and builds a sense of discovery—will the next bite be sweetbread or crayfish?

On the surface Reflections on Culinary Artistry is a weighty book. It has substantial size and heft, a price tag of $50.00, and a list of five coproducers on the cover. But in the reading it is light, airy, evanescent. Yet as you linger over the pages, the mind of the chef slowly reveals its shape. A mood takes hold, a feeling seeps through. The sparseness of the text forces the reader to fill in, to react, to absorb through the senses and emotions more than the mind. If you pay close attention and, as author demands, open your mind to free it of preconceived ideas, an understanding of this extraordinary chef emerges. He doesn’t beckon you to your kitchen, however; he drives you to your computer to try chocolate with celery confit or with caramel and artichokes. You learn to intensify the bitterness of orange juice as an ingredient by including a few seeds in the juice extractor. But then you might wonder what to actually do with a combination of pumpkin, carrot juice, parmesan, and pumpkin seeds. “The ingredients and pictures do not give away a recipe, only a trail,” warns Gagnaire. You betcha.

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—Phyllis Richman, Washington, D.C.