A Slice of Life: Contemporary Writers on Food
Edited by Bonnie Marranca with a preface by Betty Fussell
400 pp. $26.95 (paper)

Just as at any good dinner party, the invitees here are among
the best and brightest in their field: M.F.K. Fisher, Calvin
Trillin, Jeffrey Steingarten, Corby Kummer, Anthony Bourdain,
with some special guests (Julia Child, Alice Waters) and
learned professors (Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Susan
Sontag). If you can’t sit down to sup with Shakespeare,
Einstein, and Dorothy Parker, this crowd will do. There is
even a place set for the dear departed Laurie Colwin. The
writings selected are often comfortingly familiar (“I see
Calvin’s going to tell the one about the sausages…”)
yet
always thoughtful and entertaining.

It’s always difficult to review a large group of short pieces
like this. In typical LA fashion, I have decided to bypass sub-
stance and instead single out a beautiful few for awards,
so that I can get on with planning the party afterwards.

And the winners are…

Short Subject Roland Barthes, for “Chopsticks”: “By chop-
sticks, food becomes no longer a prey to which one does
violence…but a substance harmoniously transferred” (p.
42).
Two pages of bliss.

Harry Potter Award Jay Parini, for “Writing in Restaurants”:
“I was fully aware of who else was sitting in Lou’s. Every
public eating place has its regulars, and the regulars are a
right-knit group, loyal to their spot…” (p. 59). J.K. Rowling
would understand.

I Can’t Define Food Porn, but I Know It When I See It
Sally Tisdale, for “Meat”: “Sometimes I would come into
the kitchen in the middle of the morning and find a tongue
set out waiting for the pot, an enormous apostrophe of flesh
covered in pale papillae” (p.121). Then it gets explicit.

The Making Of Julia Child, for “About the Television
Series”: “The day in June for our first taping, ‘The French
Omelette,’ Paul and I packed our station wagon with pots,
pans, eggs, and trimmings and were off to the Gas Company.
Parking was difficult in downtown Boston, so he off-loaded
inside the main entrance, and I stood over our mound until
he returned” (p.166). Who would dare purloin a pan from
over six feet of a French chef/OSS operative?

Thoughts You Thought Were Peculiar to You but Are Not
Gerald Asher, for “Remembrance of Wines Past”: “I was
actually sharing calories transmitted in solar energy that had
also warmed the faces of Thomas Jefferson and Marie-
Antoinette” (p.143). And so much better stated.

Crise de Nerfs Adam Gopnik, for “The Crisis in French
Cooking”: “I think that the real problem lies in the French
genius for laying the intellectual foundation for a revolution
that takes place somewhere else” (p.197). Witness the
movies and airplanes.

In addition to writings on the arts of eating in Budapest,
Israel, Russia, Venice, Paris, New York, Moracco, and Spain,
we have Michael Doris on pie, Charles Simic on tomatoes,
Michael Pollan on organic food, and Kummer on coffee
beans. Additional footage includes Chitrita Banerji’s piece
on the food strictures imposed on Bengali widows, prison
remembrances of wine and food by Frank Prial, and an
investigation of vegetarianism by Steingarten (who, of
course, finally gives in to lobster).

Finally, we come to the…

Lifetime Achievement Award The winner is…Alice Waters,
for “The Farm Restaurant Connection”:
If, as I believe, restaurants are communities—each with its own culture—
then Chez Panisse began as a hunter-gatherer culture and, to a lesser
extent, still is. Not only did we prowl the supermarkets, the stores and
stalls of Chinatown, and such specialty shops as Berkeley then pos-
sessed…but we literally foraged. We gathered watercress from streams,
picked nasturtiums and fennel from roadsides, and gathered blackberries
from the Santa Fe tracks in Berkeley. (p.323)

And so it began.
—Jennifer Judkins, University of California, Los Angeles

A Bite off Mama’s Plate: Mothers’ and Daughters’
Connection through Food
Miriam Meyers
Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 2001
x + 194 pp. $24.95 (cloth)

A year after her mother died, Miriam Meyers visited her
grave in Atlanta. On her way to the cemetery, she bought a
hickory-smoked barbecue sandwich. Sitting on the ground
beside the grave, she shared the meal with her mother,
talking with her between bites. “Enjoying a meal at her
grave was the best possible way to celebrate the memory
of my mother,” Meyers writes (p.1).

Like this opening anecdote, A Bite off Mama’s Plate is a
colorful, affectionate, and often humorous exploration of the
“connection(s) women in families have through food” (p.3).