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 fashion, I have decided to bypass substance 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 chopsticks, 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, Morocco, 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 possessed…but we literally foraged. We gathered watercress from streams, picked nasturtiums and fennel from road sides, 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).
Meyers conceived the book as a response to recent scholarship on dieting and body image that depicts mothers’ and daughters’ relationship to food as largely problematic. Drawing on evidence from literature, film, popular novels, and interviews with contemporary women, Meyers has assembled a compendium of the varied ways that food and cooking have facilitated what she characterizes as positive emotional connections between mothers and daughters. When mothers and daughters eat, cook, and discuss food together, they build and communicate affection, preserve regional and cultural traditions, and strengthen generational ties. Mealtimes, holidays, and “kitchen time” are important moments for “building and even healing the family,” she believes (p.13). From their mothers, daughters learn not only cooking skills but “messages about life”—i.e., “make do with what you have,” “share hospitality,” and “offer abundance,” all of which is metaphorically demonstrated through their mothers’ handling of food (p.125). Rather than a sign of oppression, the centrality of food in American women’s lives and “women’s culture is a source of richness, where women’s intelligence, creativity and caring manifests itself day in and day out” (p.159).

Meyers’s anecdotes and testimonies (interspersed with recipes for such comfort foods as turkey and gravy, macaroni and cheese, and meatloaf) vividly re-create the camaraderie mothers and daughters often feel when they come together around food. But the book at times seems simplistic and haphazardly researched. Traditional Hindu aphorisms appear alongside anecdotes from nineteenth-century literature and quotations from contemporary women; analytically unfocused, the book does not engage with the historical, anthropological, or feminist literature on women and food that might have moored it in a much-needed conceptual framework. In her attempt to undo the bias toward disorder and pathology, Meyers tends to glorify the mother-daughter-food relationship, overlooking its complexities and contradictions.

For contemporary women the kitchen can be a site of emotional bonding and intense (and often unspoken) conflict. Sharing recipes can strengthen family ties at the same time it stirs up intergenerational strife. Meyers unquestioningly cites women’s happy memories of cooking with their mothers as evidence of healthy relationships and emotionally beneficial interactions. A more useful approach might probe the tensions that lie beneath, or alongside, the fond recollections of taking “a bite off mama’s plate.”

A careful analysis of the nuanced meanings of women’s food memories and practices is particularly important in light of the contested politics of food and cooking in contemporary American culture. Because women’s traditionally glorified role as nurturers and food providers has been one of the most visible symbols of female oppression, food, cooking, and the kitchen have become a cultural battleground in the ongoing struggle to redefine gender norms and women’s social roles. Despite her claims to feminism, Meyers seems to uphold many of the stereotypes and assumptions that have been challenged by feminist activists. She celebrates women’s selfless efforts to cook for their families, lauds the centrality of food in women’s lives, and describes learning to cook as an esteemed part of female socialization. She reports but does not question that women continue to prepare most meals in middle-class American homes or that women often use food as a form of emotional expression and turn to food for comfort.

Nonetheless, the book raises important and provocative questions that could inspire further research. How have major social transformations in the past twenty years—women’s increased workforce participation, our growing dependence on fast food, and the obsession with fitness—transformed the mother-daughter-food connection? How do intergenerational food relationships vary by class, race, and region? A Bite off Mama’s Plate is a call to continue probing the complex and changing dynamics of this emotionally charged relationship and to envision how mothers and daughters might redefine their connection to the kitchen and cooking in ways that preserve the richness of tradition while creating possibilities for empowerment.

—Samantha Barbas, Chapman University

Edited by Dieter Richter
Köln: DuMont Verlag, 2002
199 pp. Illustrations. (paper)

This useful anthology explores food and eating as forms of virtual travel. As a counterpoint to globalization and the international spread of standardized fast foods and, at least in global cities, ethnic restaurants, a demand for regional cuisine has arisen. However, this demand is driven by middle- and upper-class tourists and the tourist industry rather than local inhabitants. Several contributions give a historical overview of German tourism to France and Italy and the changing attitudes toward the cooking of these countries. Eighteenth-century travelers on the Grand Tour still vented their disgust at Italian staples like olive oil and garlic, even believing them to cause illness. This provincialism eventually gave way to enthusiastic acceptance and assimilation into the home culture by the late 1960s.