Can it be merely coincidence that Prospect Books is reintroducing this earnest 1805 study covering all aspects of bread making precisely when the modern artisan bread renaissance is clashing with the low-carbohydrate diet frenzy? Despite the timing, as a baker I can say how refreshing I find it that this treatise was written not by a baker but by a nineteenth-century medical practitioner, for whom the project can only have been a labor of love. According to the author’s preface, this book grew out of a presentation he made to fellow doctors who met weekly at the Theater of Guy’s Hospital in London, where they gathered to share their latest exciting findings with each other and their students.

Dr. Abraham Edlin delves into the history, cultivation, milling, and fermenting of wheat and other grains, as it was then understood, in a tour de force that caused me to wonder when, amidst all his moonlighting amongst the millers, bakers, and assizers of London, did he actually have time to practice medicine? I know from personal experience that many contemporary lawyers and doctors also fashion themselves as chefs and serious bakers, but few who I know have attacked their hobby with such detailed intensity and wild leaps of scientifically inspired intuition.

It would obviously be unfair to apply the progression of scientific discovery over the past two hundred years as a criticism of this treatise. The scientific foundations underlying Edlin’s theories were far different from the ones that exist today, but Edlin comes respectfully close to the target in many cases. For instance, it is clear today that sourdough bread is leavened by naturally occurring yeast as opposed to commercial yeast, along with bacteria, which digest the simple sugars and convert them to carbon dioxide and...
various types of acids. Edlin’s view, however, was that most of the leavening was effected by the release of carbonic gas from the wheat itself, helped along slightly by the addition of yeast, whose purpose and function was somewhat vague. Although not quite accurate, Edlin’s assumptions hit close to the mark, certainly enough to inform and justify the baking theories that follow. In fact, this is one of the great charms of the book: a view into the mindset of the scientific and cultural community of the early 1800s that permits us to witness just how nimble they were at working with the information and theories available at that time.

The recipes that Edlin collected for all three of his categories of bread (unleavened, leavened, and carbonic) serve as fascinating windows into the palates, prejudices, and methodologies of the times. The instructions for the Sabbath Jew Bread (p. 55) gave me an entirely new method of braiding, different from current versions of challah, though I was mystified by the overly ecumenical final garnish of “two thin bars [of dough] laid over it in form of a cross, the whole together making a very handsome appearance” (p. 55).

I was similarly delighted to discover a pre-ferment technique attributed to a Mr. James Stone (p. 56). In this recipe a bushel of flour (or fifty-six pounds, as I learned in the valuable appendix, which served as a kind of FAQ for Edlin’s contemporaries and as a trove of preserved data for current readers) is raised by a mere teaspoonful of yeast, which is allowed to grow first within a thin flour-and-water batter, augmented by a series of sequential flour additions over about twelve hours, until finally emerging as fully raised dough, ready to divide and bake into many loaves.

The book includes dozens of wheaten recipes—more accurately, methods—and also variations on many non-wheat breads using flour from corn, rye, buckwheat, barley, oats, beans, peas, potatoes, and the root of “a very acrid [native American] plant called Manise” (p. 92). We know it now as manioc, from which cassava, or tapioca, is derived. The steps for extracting cassava flour from the poisonous root are beautifully described and certainly expanded my understanding of that long-held mystery.

The book’s various methods are supplemented by arcane milling information regarding the yields that a bushel of grain or beans will produce when ground, how to grow your own yeast six different ways, and a historically important section on the regulations and penalties governing the buying and selling of grain and bread, known as the assize of bread. The obsessively detailed weight and price controls described by Edlin confirm that this was a society that took bread very seriously, and the penalties associated with malfeasance bore a stern message to millers, bakers, and consumers alike: Don’t mess with the daily bread.

At the outset of this review, I wondered about the timing of the re-release of this book; I believe that Edlin’s treatise exists in its reincarnated state not to make a case for bread—as if it were even necessary— or even to offer a cultural glimpse of nineteenth-century Britain. Instead, Edlin’s treatise feeds an unappeasable hunger for more insight into this most iconic of foods, an appetite that obviously existed as much in 1805 as it does today. It seems that, even when we’re not eating bread, we just can’t get enough of it.

—Peter Reinhart, Johnson and Wales University

The Duchess of Malfi’s Apricots, and Other Literary Fruits

Robert Palter
Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002
xviii + 572 pp. Illustrations. $69.95 (cloth)

In the introduction to this massive, attractively produced book, the author, a professor emeritus of the history of science at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, writes that “the completion of several pieces of scholarly research with intensely controversial intellectual and political overtones found me eager to return to the [for me] more relaxed theme of food in literature” (pp. 1–2). Palter alludes, apparently, to the disputes over Black Athena, in which he played a part; afterwards, collecting and commenting on literary and art works concerning fruit must indeed have served as delightful recreation. For readers, too, the resulting omnium-gatherum is pleasant for browsing.

Most chapters treat of individual fruits or classes of fruits, such as apples or berries, and start with an overview of botany and history. The bulk of the book consists of excerpts from diverse literary genres, both of poetry and prose, in some twenty-five languages, over the last twenty-five centuries. Secondary, the text focuses on many examples of fruit-related art and offers thirty-seven good-quality color reproductions. Also included are a few stray rock lyrics and movie scenes, such as one from The Public Enemy, from 1931, in which “James Cagney smashes a grapefruit into the face of gang moll Mae Clark” (p. 434). Most of the works are lightly stitched together, although a few receive extensive critical discussion.

It’s fun that Palter has gathered together in one book so many works, both familiar and unfamiliar. There’s William Carlos Williams on plums (“This is just to say / I have eaten / the plums / that were in / the ice box...,” p. 205); Charles