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 re incarnated 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. Secondly, 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
Darwin on the relation between peaches and nectarines (pp. 225–226); D.H. Lawrence on medlars (“wineskins of brown morbidity,” p. 293); and Pablo Neruda on lemons (“a ray of light that was made fruit,” p. 429). One might quibble with the choices, but this book offers a selection of works not easily found elsewhere; there’s a particularly impressive trove of modern poetry in translation.

Palter’s writing is workmanlike but rarely a joy in itself. Moreover, although he has made a reasonable effort to consult good sources, on horticultural and historical matters he is on insecure terrain. It is clear that his is a work of “book learning” and is not based on in-depth familiarity with actual fruit. In commenting on a poem by a Filipino American, Palter confuses a chico, a sapodilla, with a shrub native to the western United States (p. 260). He doesn’t recognize that the spring-ripening fruit described by Mary Simek is a loquat, not a medlar (pp. 293–294). He is confused by the Italian term limonata (a lemon-house, basically an orangery for lemons, p. 425).

Palter makes a big deal of vetting the sources for the story, recounted in John McPhee’s Oranges, that the Lombards were lured to invade Italy in the sixth century A.D. by a gift of oranges from a traitorous Byzantine general. But he fails to track down the crucial earliest surviving source for the legend, the eighth-century historian Paul the Deacon: “He sends many kinds of fruits and samples of other things with which Italy is well supplied, whereby to attract their minds to come.” (History of the Lombards, William Dudley Foulke, trans. [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1974].)

More problematic than these occasional missteps, for the casual reader, is the book’s disjointed flow. For example, in a few pages (pp. 695–698) Palter jumps from a discussion of medieval opinions on the health properties of fruit to a nineteenth-century American view (“Which I can only assume is not atypical”); to an account of a plague of locusts in the Bible; to a passage in Colette about a pear devoured by wasps; to mentions of paintings depicting pears and wasps; to descriptions of the travails of early American growers. Some of the individual citations may be of interest to those researching a particular fruit, but the many chronological and topical leaps make reading the whole book dizzying and unsatisfying for the general reader. One might best enjoy it by taking occasional bites, as one would use a dictionary of quotations.

—David Karp, Los Angeles, CA

Is Laura Shapiro mellowing with age? In Perfection Salad (1986), she more-or-less skewered the women who, at the turn of the twentieth century, helped set the middle class on a culinary path that elevated half-baked science and the Victorian ideal of dainty femininity over the actual taste of food. In this book, about the post–World War II food industries and how they peddled taste-deprived packaged foods to middle-class housewives, she is quite benign about the companies’ handmaidens: the women who promoted time-saving recipes such as A Twenty Minute Roast and slices of Spam baked with orange marmalade. Many of them, she says, were professional women in various lines of work who did not really buy into the prevailing notion that women could gain fulfillment only as homemakers, nor did the housewives they targeted respond as favorably as they hoped.

This is nothing new for social historians. For years they have disputed the popular image of the 1950s as an era of universal conformity wherein June Cleaver embodied the ideal; they have instead pointed to the dissenting voices behind the blare of enthusiasm generated by the commercial processors of foods and their products. However, Shapiro’s well-written book adds considerably to our understanding of this domestic subversion. She says that, although many women were prepared to sacrifice taste for convenience, getting them to give up the sense of gratification that comes from preparing their family’s food was another matter. Advertisers tried to persuade their customers that doctoring up dishes by mixing packaged foods together was a creative process and that dishes could be glamorized with canned mushrooms, canned pineapple, and/or—best of all—canned crabmeat. However, despite the enthusiasm with which they made concoctions out of Jell-O, canned soups, Cheez Whiz, and marshmallows, most middle-class housewives still tended to use packaged foods in supporting roles in meals that they primarily prepared themselves. Shapiro sees the popularity of the nation’s most famous food promotion, the Pillsbury Bake-Off, as contradicting the era’s conventional wisdom that traditional cooking was dead and that women did not want to prepare things from scratch.

Shapiro also challenges the notion that women’s destiny in the 1950s lay in the home, by gesturing to the increasing number of middle-class women who were working outside the home during the period. A chapter on Poppy Cannon,