In This Issue

Comment cuisiner un phénix: Essai sur l'imaginaire gastronomique
Allen S. Weiss

Histoire de l'alimentation: Quels enjeux pour la formation?
Edited by Julia Caero with Christophe Marion

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The European Institute of Food History, Tours, France

The Duchess Who Wouldn't Sit Down:
An Informal History of Informality
Jesse Browner

The Secret Life of Lobsters: How Fishermen and Scientists
Are Unraveling the Mysteries of Our Favorite Crustacean
Trevor Corson

Stalking the Green Fairy: And Other Fantastic
Adventures in Food and Drink
James Villas

Feeding London: A Taste of History
Richard Tames

Hunger Overcome? Food and Resistance
in Twentieth-Century African American Literature
Andrew Wames

The Empire of Tea: The Remarkable History
of the Plant That Took Over the World
Alan Macfarlane and Iris Macfarlane

Super Chefs: The Making of the
Great Modern Restaurant Empires
Juliette Rossant

Toast: The Story of a Boy’s Hunger
Nigel Slater

Candyfreak: A Journey through the Chocolate Underbelly of America
Steve Almond

Comment cuisiner un phénix:
Essai sur l'imaginaire gastronomique
Allen S. Weiss
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81 pp. €428 (paper)

Comment cuisiner un phénix—that is to say, How to Cook a Phoenix—is a savory both tongue-in-cheek and cheeky that begins and ends by confronting the reader with a paradox: that gastronomic savoir is (according to Kant) at once universal and subjective (p.7); that the phoenix is a blend of oxymoronic features (p.60). Allen Weiss, who juggles approaches to his subject like a medieval jester entertaining his banqueters, is playing games with his readers, asking them to join in: the play's the thing. This authorizes the reviewer to do some whimsical juggling of her own.

First, a brief look at the author: Weiss has a long and decidedly eclectic list of publications, nearly all short, a great many of them editor or coeditorships, along with prefaces. He has published in both English and French, and what is arguably his most substantial work, Mirrors of Infinity, has been translated into French as Miroirs de l'infini with prestigious Seuil as publisher. Weiss’s eclecticism stems from the scope of his subject matter and approaches (philosophy, aesthetics, art, history, gardens, psychoanalysis, modernism, gastronomy, and then some...) and from his penchant for experimenting with diverse media (a customized variant of synesthesia, one might say). He has come to the world of food fairly recently, yet with a vengeance. You might wonder: Is his balancing act up to snuff? How does it hold up in Cuisiner...? Does he make a case for “cryptogastronomy” (one of several neologisms), i.e., the science of nonexistent good eating?

Wordplay begins with the title. Cuisiner means “to cook up,” as well as “to cook”; Weiss is cooking up a new take on a powerful age-old myth by dressing his bird in a variety of ways. Cuisiner also signifies “to grill” (as in a police station); Weiss is giving his phoenix the treatment, extracting from
his subject all that it can yield, letting it speak by way of an abundance of authors and texts ranging from antiquity to our day, so as to stuff his feathered bird in true gourmet fashion. A jumbled sampling of such satura includes Ovid, Alexandre Dumas, the Bible, Levi-Strauss, Baudelaire, Bachelard, Kant, Descartes, and Artaud. In an appendix, an ode to the phoenix by the poet Lactance titled “Carmen de ave phoenicé” apotheosizes Weiss’s mythical bird. One also senses the discreet presence of Barthes and semiotics. Brillat-Savarin is, of course, at hand as well. The professeur has a similar knack for neologisms and is a well-known master of the tongue-in-cheek (Physiologie has been labeled a pastiche of Idéologie writings). Could Weiss’s text, while promoting an aesthetic approach to his subject, likewise be a take-off on dogmatic approaches to food? The book’s concluding section questioning the kosher status of the phoenix surely points in this direction: It is a saucy illustration of Talmudic reasoning getting all tied up in the strands of culinaria hebraica, the final pointe of a text both breezy and intense.

Is Cuisiner merely a ragout of sorts, or is it a masterly blend of multiple ingredients? Take your pick. Culinary terms and gastronomic anecdotes are never far away, and there is sufficient first-person narration to convince us that Weiss himself is an aficionado. Yet this little essay, this vignette, tells us more about poetry, myth, ontology, and inner yearnings than cookery or gastronomy. Early on in his text, Weiss states that every dish is a symbol and that attainable, increases apace. So where, one may ask, is the beef? Currently in French secondary schools, whose curricula are mandated and regulated at the national level, the study of food is entirely incidental to aspects of the life sciences such as digestive processes. Any study of food history therefore depends on the interests of individual teachers (and, elsewhere, university professors), while the number of graduate-level programs devoted uniquely to food history may be counted on the fingers of one hand. Clearly, the interest of privileging food over other classroom topics, especially at the secondary level, remains open to debate. Several respondents who teach in practical training programs or who work in industry state that their view of their market does not reveal any need at all for food history. Yet other practical programs already incorporate aspects of food history into classes. Moreover, food-related research flourishes in a variety of contexts. The number of food-related publications, both serious and frivolous, increases apace. So where, one may ask, is the beef?

One respondent observes that all history is written strategically. That is, any narrative reflects the motivations of a writer who responds to a particular context and to pressures that may be external or internal or both. That food history pedagogy has been raised as an issue by historians may suggest that this book is a plea for history, for the work of memory, culture, and seemingly gratuitous analysis in a society that rewards the practical, the professional, and the productive. It is ironic that the short papers, some bluntly self-interested, are largely anecdotal rather than researched. The editorial decision to privilege inclusiveness and breadth over depth means further that readers will not discover here

A conference held in Tours in December 2002 resulted in twenty-seven short published papers on aspects of food pedagogy, whether virtual or actual. Organized by historians Julia Csergo and Christophe Marion, the conference notably brought together respondents from a variety of sectors. Historians with university posts, teachers in high schools that offer practical training for tourism and the culinary professions, agricultural engineers, and a European Union official concerned with food policy all add their two centimes to the sprawling roundtable conversation. Most participants acknowledge the interest of studying food. None dispute the legitimacy of food as an object for serious research in any number of disciplines. More than one respondent notes that because food is accessible from many disciplines, its inclusion in curricula could facilitate an integrated or interdisciplinary approach to education at any level. Similarly, in the domain of research, food works as a fulcrum for approaches from the historical to the economic, from the literary to the anthropological, without leaving aside the hard tasks of biology and chemistry.

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Where and how is food history currently taught in France? Should it be more widely taught? What motivates the teaching of food history or its exclusion from a curriculum?