The Recipe Reader
Edited by Janet Floyd and Laurel Forster
London: Ashgate Press, 2004
246 pp. $79.95 (cloth)

The past twenty years have seen a remarkable change in how recipe collections are read. Scholars in women’s studies, cultural studies, anthropology, nutrition, history, literature, and other fields have all contributed to our growing ability to fully read recipe collections. We now understand that narrativity, postcolonial theory, deconstruction, feminism, performance theory, and other critical approaches can and should be applied to cookbooks. Janet Floyd and Laurel Foster’s Recipe Reader benefits from and adds to the previous scholarship in this area.

The book is divided into three sections: “Traditions,” in which five authors investigate nineteenth- and early twentieth-century cookbooks; “Individual Interventions,” wherein we are introduced (separately) to the idiosyncrasies of two English culinary writers, Elizabeth Robins Pennell and Elizabeth David; and “Contemporary Contexts,” which asks readers to consider food and feminism, recipes in contemporary fiction, the sexual and sensual aspects of television cookery shows, and the ways in which immigrants adhere to and adapt their recipes along with their ethnic identities. “The Recipe in Its Cultural Contexts,” an introduction by editors Janet Floyd and Laurel Forster, precedes this fine array of well-researched and well-written material and discusses “the breadth of contexts through which the recipe may be understood” (p.8).

This book takes its place in the line of works focused specifically on opening up the rhetoric of cookbooks and recipes. Some studies that I’ve found particularly helpful are the following (arranged in order of publication date).

- Andrew Smith, CentennialsUCKEY COOK Book (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2000).
- Janet Theophano, Eat My Words: Reading Women’s Lives through the Cookbooks They Wrote (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).
- Jessamyn Neuhaus, Manly Meals and Mom’s Home Cooking: Cookbooks and Gender in Modern America (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

I hope that my own edited collection, Recipes for Reading: Community Cookbooks, Stories, Histories (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), has also contributed to the discussion of recipes as readerly, if fragmented, narratives.

Despite the work already done to uncover the many ways that recipes create and lend meaning to other forms of discourse, The Recipe Reader contributes some new subjects for analysis and presents new perspectives on works many of us have read before. For example, while I’ve listened to conference presentations and read some analyses of celebrity chefs and tv-cook show hosts, “Nigella Bites the Naked Chef: The Sexual and the Sensual in Television Cookery Programmes” by Maggie Andrews helped me better understand that the shows and their stars “speak to a range of anxieties and insecurities in relation to the pleasures of eating, gendered identity formation, domesticity and the place of television within the ‘family’” (p.189). Likewise, I’m already familiar with the notion that nineteenth-century women, in different parts of the world, have played important roles in forming national identities by adopting and fusing previously discrete culinary traditions and ingredients. However, Susan Zlotnick’s “Domesticating Imperialism: Curry and Cookbooks in Victorian England” fascinated me because I hadn’t previously known about the way Victorian British women “incorporated Indian food, which functioned metonymically for India, into the national diet and made it culturally British” (p.73).

As one might expect, a number of these essays provide a feminist perspective. This stance is particularly interesting given, in a number of cases, the focus is on conflicts within individuals or groups, as women find themselves struggling with traditional-domestic versus liberationist impulses. Talia Schaffer shows us how Elizabeth Robins Pennell managed to “work both sides of this divide” (p.105) through the language of aestheticism. Janet Floyd analyzes Elizabeth David’s negotiations among “gastronomy, the high literary aspirations, the rejection of modern [war-worn] Britain, the colonial
and post-colonial world-view” (p. 137), demonstrating David was torn between presenting herself as a career woman and as a domestic figure (p. 139). Laurel Forster’s piece, “Liberating the Recipe: A Study of the Relationship between Food and Feminism in the Early 1970s,” also discerns tensions, even among the most radical writers of the women’s liberation movement, between mainstream ideas about food and identity and more experimental attitudes toward women’s relationships to domestic, career, and personal issues.

While I have focused on a few of the essays I found to be the most eye-opening, I certainly don’t mean to discount any of the fine work here. If you’re a recipe reader—and if you’re reading this, I’m betting that you are—you’ll find plenty of insights and substantial exploration within the pages of The Recipe Reader.

—Anne Bower, Ohio State University—Marion

Fork It Over: The Intrepid Adventures of a Professional Eater
Alan Richman
336 pp. $34.95 (cloth) / $24.95 (paper)

Fork It Over is a collection of previously published essays by Alan Richman that appeared between March 1989 and May 2004, mainly in gq. Since they were written primarily for magazines, the shelf life of some of the pieces has expired, though others are still crisp and fresh. Richman ascribes to Trillinesque populism—cheap food is more likely to be good than gourmet food, especially if the latter is cooked by a celebrity chef—but he knows his wine and cheese and is proud of it (he also seems to be proud of the fact that he is fat and Jewish, as he evinces a certain kind of mama’s boy masculinity). Richman’s style is reminiscent of both Calvin Trillin and Jeffrey Steingarten. Sometimes the parallels among the three are so close it’s easy to get confused: which one likes barbecue? Was it Kansas or coastal North Carolina where you get “the best barbecue in the world”? Which one hates Indian desserts and Korean food?

The volume contains laugh-out-loud moments, especially when Richman shares his prejudices about self-righteous vegans, cheap early-birders, and neurotic women who think that butter and meat will kill you. Although stereotypes can be funny, the smart-to-offense ratio needs to be much higher if an old bromide like “the cheap Jew” is going to get any laughs. But here is a Jewish guy making bad Jewish jokes, so I had to let it go. Richman’s humor works if you share some of his pet peeves, such as celebrity chefs who don’t cook anymore, overrated food by Paul Bocuse, the inherent ugliness of banquets, and pretty boy Todd English’s over-the-top cooking. He gives voice to small prejudices that many of us feel yet are unwilling to acknowledge.

Despite the on-the-mark success of some of his tirades, Richman can deflate his own arguments by overdoing it. For instance, many of us have grown weary of hearing that all foreign foods are wonderful, but can Richman’s contrary assertion that there is not a single good meal in Naples be true? His sharp, comic eye, exposing pretentious sentimentality about exotic locales, fails when it settles on specific people or places (the Jewish mother, Louis Farrakhan, or that restaurant in Shanghai) and devolves instead into stereotype. Thus I grew tired about halfway through the book.

Perhaps we are condemned to read chefs’ maudlin rags to riches tales about food and family (Anthony Bourdain is a notable exception) and clever, insubstantial narratives by food critics. Food appears to be surprisingly trivial in this book. Richman, in fact, has an interest in introspection about food, but his mocking voice too often drowns his meditations.

My innate skepticism may have sabotaged my initial reading. After all, we needn’t be so grim and analytical about food. So I asked two people whose opinions I trust how they regarded Richman’s writing, and both assured me that he was “one of the best.” Prodded by the 100 percent “thumbs-up” rate and the suspicion I had mistaken irony for tomfoolery, I gave Richman another chance, and as I picked up where I had left off, I found myself warming up to him. The chapter on Havana suddenly turned serious and was, in fact, pretty good. The next few essays, such as the one on Moishe’s of Montreal (where the food gets seriously good for the first time) and the one on cranky old Jewish waiters, were also interesting and well written. These essays were among the longest in the book, leading me to conclude the more Richman has to say, the better he gets.

Most of Fork It Over is good gq stuff: food and sex perpetually intertwined. Given anthropologists are always telling us the two loop around each other precisely because both penetrate the surface of our body, Richman’s coupling is certainly defensible and not unexpected. But ultimately the book is an odd mixture of Sharon Stone bending over in a low-cut black crepe Vera Wang cocktail dress asking for more (well…more food) and a neurotic can’t-get-it-up Woody Allen shtick. Its originality resides in the strange intersection of these polarities. In fact, the Sharon Stone chapter, which comes toward the end, is quite good.

Long ago John and Karen Hess noted there are two kinds of food writing in the United States, which reflect two kinds of good food: