The People’s Chef: Alexis Soyer, A Life in Seven Courses
Ruth Brandon
Chichester, uk: John Wiley and Sons, Ltd., 2004 (American edition published by Walker and Company)
xvi + 320 pp. Illustrations. $27.95 (cloth)

Novelist William Makepeace Thackeray once observed that the process of writing the life of a friend was equivalent to feasting off his remains. Ruth Brandon, author of The People’s Chef, has created a delicious feast out of the life of Alexis Soyer, England’s first celebrity chef. For those who have not yet discovered Soyer, Brandon’s book is an excellent introduction. Readers who are already familiar with Soyer’s life and work will find many new insights. As the subtitle suggests, Brandon organizes Soyer’s biographical history around a dinner cooked and sampled by herself and her friends, following the typical order of service for a seven-course meal in nineteenth-century England and based on recipes from Soyer’s many books. Each dish on the menu represents an important episode in Soyer’s life.

The Menu:
New Spring and Autumn Soup
Fish: Salmon with Shrimp Sauce
Hors d’Oeuvres Variés
Relevé: Mutton Chops Reform
Entrée Chaud: Famine Soup
Roast: Quail à la Symposium
Entremets: Turkish Delights
Coffee

Alexis Soyer was born into poverty in Meaux-en-Brie, France, in 1810. At the age of eleven he was sent to Paris to train as a chef. After the revolutions of 1830, Soyer fled to England, where he became the personal chef to several wealthy members of the aristocracy and gentry. He became nationally famous as the chef of the Reform, one of London’s leading social and political clubs. Soyer also had a keen interest in charity and dietary reform—designing and supporting soup kitchens during the Irish Famine and in poor districts of London and writing cookbooks for the poor and the middle class. Also an inventor, Soyer designed kitchens and gas ranges, various pans and serving dishes, and tendon separators for inexpert carvers. His “magic stove” was a small portable cooking apparatus that could boil, fry, and roast. Soyer also marketed prepared foods such as Soyer’s Sauce for meats and Soyer’s Nectar, a sparkling beverage. He opened one of the first restaurants in London. In 1855 he joined Florence Nightingale in the Crimea and transformed cookery in the British army. Soyer’s life was brief (he died at age forty-eight), but it was very full.

Soyer represents a challenge for biographers. As Brandon explains, few letters and no other private writings of Soyer’s have survived. Therefore, Brandon draws on Soyer’s cookbooks and the remembrances of his long-time associates. She also relies upon the considerable expertise of Frank Clement-Lorford, who has been researching Soyer for many years and to whom Brandon’s book is dedicated. Unlike his previous biographers, Brandon uses archival materials from France and England to build a more complete picture of Soyer’s life. Historians will find much to interest them in Brandon’s account, although at times her documentation is less full than specialists might desire. That said, Brandon’s biography is written for a much wider audience, and she succeeds admirably in providing general readers with a deeper understanding of Soyer and his context.

Another appealing aspect of the book is Brandon’s recounting of her attempts to cook from Soyer’s recipes. She relies on several of his cookbooks, including The Gastronomic Regenerator (1846), The Modern Housewife (1849), Soyer’s Charitable Cookery (1847), Soyer’s Shilling Cookery for the People (1854), and Soyer’s Culinary Campaign (1857). The first of these was an expensive volume purchased by Soyer’s wealthy clientele, featuring his trademark gourmet dishes such as Brandon’s relevé, Mutton Chops Reform. The Modern Housewife is written for middle-class wives and offers much advice on choosing fresh foods, diet and nutrition, and meal planning. Soyer’s books for the working classes offer similar advice, with a greater emphasis on economy. Soyer’s Culinary Campaign is his account of his activities in the Crimea during the war, including recipes for hospital diets (this was the first aspect of military cooking that Soyer tackled on his arrival at the notoriously filthy and disorganized hospital at Scutari).

In cooking Soyer’s recipes, Brandon makes a number of delightful discoveries. Soyer’s method for preparing large fish, Brandon’s second course, is a case in point. Brandon is skeptical that boiling a fish in brine, from a cold pan (as one would for potatoes), will produce an edible result. Yet, following Soyer’s directions with a steelhead (and subsequently several other large fish), Brandon ends up with delicious, perfectly cooked fish. This recipe also serves as one example of Brandon’s method of branching out from her menu to provide a richer portrait of Soyer’s times. Musing on the choice of fish leads to a discussion of the state of nutrition in the country, pollution in the city, the self-sufficient estates of the country gentry, and relations among the peasants, the gentry, and the state.
While the fish appealed to Brandon and her tasters, not every recipe did. In fact, the shrimp sauce Soyer suggests for the fish is rich and showy yet not particularly tasty by modern standards. For the country-house set who employed French chefs, appearances and luxury were often more important than the quality of the cooking. While Soyer attempted to get his British clients interested in fine cuisine, he never lost sight of their tastes in his preparations. Brandon does not gloss over Soyer’s lifelong quest for acceptance by the rich and famous, arguing persuasively that his intense need for approval in the end prevented him from ever achieving it.

The courses on Brandon’s menu corresponding to Soyer’s charitable undertakings show us another side of life in the nineteenth century. Like the wealthy, poorer people from Britain and Ireland were, to a Frenchman like Soyer, shockingly disinterested in what they ate. While he was in Ireland to set up emergency soup kitchens, Soyer was distressed that people could starve when they were surrounded by local foods, most notably fish and seafood. Similarly, on his arrival in the Crimea, Soyer evinced horror at the soldiers’ method of cooking meat. When the time arrives for Brandon to cook one of Soyer’s famine recipes, her tasters beg off, and only her family can be forced to consume Soup Receipt No. 1. Their reaction mirrors that of the aristocrats Soyer gave samples to: it was “palatable.” Of course, most of the preparations handed out to the poor were neither palatable nor nutritious, so Soup Receipt No. 1 was a tremendous step up.

While there is much to praise in Soyer, Brandon does not shrink from discussing his shortcomings. I have already mentioned his desperation for acceptance by the rich and powerful. Soyer’s talent for self-promotion was often put to good uses, but not always. For example, Soyer claimed to be the author of a history of food that he did not actually write, The Pantropheon (1853).

Soyer’s life and the feast that Ruth Brandon has made of it will be of great interest to cooks, historians, and any reader who loves good food, fine dining, or sharing the life of a flamboyant and congenial soul through his cooking. Brandon’s epigraph for the first chapter comes from Brillat-Savarin: “Tell me what you eat: I will tell you what you are.” In this delightful biography, Ruth Brandon has taken this challenge literally.

—April Bullock, California State University—Fullerton

The Essence of Style: How the French Invented High Fashion, Fine Food, Chic Cafés, Style, Sophistication and Glamour
Joan De Jean
New York: Free Press, 2005
viii + 303 pp. Illustrations. $25.00 (cloth)

It has been said that the French are masters of everything, with the exception of the automobile. And cars are about the only thing Joan De Jean does not cover in her ambitious project. Had they been around during the time of Louis xiv (the Sun King), she no doubt would have mentioned them, along with the subjects she does discuss, such as cooking, champagne, fashion, footwear, coffeehouses, mirrors, and umbrellas.

The title implies that the book reveals how the French became masters of fine living. This is a bit of a misnomer. In reality, The Essence of Style is about the reign of Louis xiv. The author contends that the king and his court were essentially responsible for the style and sophistication that still characterize French life today. It’s an interesting idea.

For those of us not into haute couture, haute cuisine might be the most evident manifestation of this idea, as the French culinary history is complex, with many layers and influences, but De Jean tends to oversimplify the subject and ignores anything that does not correspond to her time frame, regardless of its relevance. Too focused on the reign of the Sun King, De Jean struggles to make her points. Essentially, she focuses on only a couple of cookbooks. While there can be no doubt about the importance of La Varenne’s book, Le Cuisinier François, its role is inflated here.

At first glance the book appears to be very well researched. The author, a former professor of French who has written extensively about Louis xiv, offers up many interesting tidbits. However, the book lacks input from current leaders in the fields she discusses. Who better to discuss the continuing influence of the seventeenth century than a leading designer or a top chef? Occasionally, modern anecdotes are thrown in, as in De Jean’s use of the tragic story of chef Bernard Loiseau. This story serves no real purpose in the context of her narrative; she sets the scene only to return us to the time of King Louis. It is also with Loiseau’s story that the author ignores the basic facts of a well-documented...