The general reader knows that cheese comes from milk and wine from grapes, but even a chocolate lover may not know that chocolate comes from the seeds of a tropical fruit that grows on trees cultivated in a narrow swath around the equator and that the tree, fruit, and seed are all called “cacao.” The story of chocolate—over three thousand years of it—is more than just a sweet kiss. Readers new to chocolate as a subject, rather than as a flavor, will be surprised by the politics, economics, botany, technology, and alchemy involved in transforming cacao into the chocolate we know and love.

Mort Rosenblum, an American journalist living in France and a self-described “chocolate ignoramus” to begin with, hits the “chocolate trail” to find out who makes the best chocolate and, he implies, to clear up “general misconceptions and historical inaccuracies” (p. 65) encountered in his reading of history texts. But first he engages an elite cadre of local connoisseurs and artisans to tutor him while he cultivates a preference for the finest French bon bons.

The resulting Chocolate: A Bittersweet Saga of Dark and Light is based heavily on interviews and travel, with copious tasting. Rosenblum looks at both American and European chocolates, from mass producers such as Mars, Hershey’s, and Cadburys to the finest couverture and artisanal confections produced by a tiny class of revered artisans. Historical and archeological background comes from Sophie and Michael Coe’s highly respected The True History of Chocolate (although current evidence suggests new theories since the publication of the Coes’ book) and from other unnamed sources. Rosenblum covers the usual high points of European chocolate history with glib humor: Spanish secrecy, royal enthusiasm, imputed medicinal and aphrodisiac properties. He travels to the Ivory Coast to investigate child slavery, the effects of the recent rebellion on the cacao market, and life on an Ivorian cacao plantation. And he interviews scientists about chocolate addiction and the healthful benefits of chocolate.

Rosenblum’s tasty travelogue makes compelling reading (and a great chocolate shopping guide), but it’s more Indiana Jones adventure with good gossip than hard investigative journalism. Juicy interviews and profiles of passionate artisan confectioners, the new bean-to-bar chocolate makers, growers, and businessmen are the real highlight of the book, as are the free flow of opinion and chat and the sheer adventure of following the chocolate trail. We meet top chocolatiers, including the imperious Robert Linxe, and the “lunatic” connoisseur Chloe Doutre-Roussel (p. 30). We fly to breathtaking Principe Island with intrepid cacao grower Claudio Corallo to spend a week deep in cacao. As in a movie, these insatiable, obsessive, genius characters bring the world of chocolate to life in vivid Technicolor. If liberties are taken, facts exaggerated, or details missed or fumbled, the audience still gets a very exciting big picture with a ring of authenticity.

Yet no misconceptions or inaccuracies are actually clarified, and of course there can be only opinions, not answers, to the question of who makes the best chocolate. And since Chocolate aspires to elucidate as well as entertain, it is troubling to find confusing terms, incomplete and careless research, scrambled information, and neither index nor bibliography. For instance, translating from the French can be tricky, not only in terms of the language but also as regards the French point of view. The very words “chocolate” and “chocolate maker” (from chocolatier) cause great confusion. Rosenblum identifies two types of chocolatiers (p. 5). One makes finished chocolate (couverture, etc.) starting from cacao beans, while the other begins with finished chocolate and creates confections (bon bons to the French) with cream, butter, sugar, and nuts. Unfortunately, after explaining this distinction, Rosenblum rarely indicates which type of chocolatier he is referring to, so when he writes “chocolate,” we must often guess whether he means confections or a bar of chocolate couverture.

Without distinguishing couverture from confections, superb quotes from master chocolatiers about freshness and the sacrifice in quality that comes with shelf life become meaningless. Freshness is a defining issue for confections—it separates the finest from the mass produced—but it is not important for couverture. Couverture improves with one to three months of age and is often held at the factory for this purpose. Rosenblum’s neglect in mentioning this fact might create a misguided clamor for “fresh” chocolate bars.

Chocolate is plagued by other fragmented definitions and breezy explanations. “Flavor,” as opposed to “bulk,” cacao beans are mentioned throughout the book (p. 18, for example), but nowhere do we learn the specific differences between these terms. Definitions of couverture and ganache-filled palet or are jumbled together, and contradictory information about fermentation appears on the same page (p. 142). Rosenblum’s dutiful summary of chocolate making from the bean to the bar reveals no more intimacy with or understanding of the process than does the average third-hand description in a cookbook.
All too often Rosenblum sacrifices accuracy for a good story. His description of fermented chocolate-scented cacao at a plantation (p.142) is pure fiction: no chocolate scent is evident until beans are roasted, elsewhere, much later in the production process. Biting into a fresh bon bon and hearing the pleasing crack of chocolate coating, he describes the piece as “still warm from tempering” (p.32). Sensual imagery, to be sure, but chocolate cool enough to crack cannot also be warm. Rosenblum cites an “Aztec” recipe that includes old-world ingredients (p.11). He makes it sound as though David Lentz directed the archaeological project at Cerén in El Salvador, when in fact Lentz was the project ethnobotanist (p.49). And the profile of the Scharffen Berger Chocolate Maker Company mistakenly attributes its achievements almost entirely to one of two remarkable founders, virtually dismissing the other, Robert Steinberg, whose vision, palate, and self-taught chocolate making have been essential from the start (p.273).

At a time when the public has a genuine interest in chocolate knowledge, it is hard to reconcile the engaging ambience of Chocolate with its pervasive carelessness. Rosenblum is skillful with the broad strokes, but he hasn’t done enough homework to get the fine points of the story right or check his facts. Ultimately, his breezy wit conveys a false sense of intimacy with the subject and seems an unnecessary attempt to make a fascinating topic somehow more compelling. The very chocolatiers that Rosenblum reveres are obsessed with detail. Ironically, it is the detail, or lack thereof, that undermines his own otherwise entertaining work.

—Alice Medrich, author, Bittersweet: Recipes and Tales from a Life in Chocolate

La Bonne Cuisine de Madame E. Saint-Ange:
The Original Companion for French Home Cooking
Translated by Paul Aratow, with an introduction by Madeleine Kamman
Berkeley, Ca: Ten Speed Press, 2005
800 pp. $40.00 (cloth)

In 1927 a cookbook was published in Paris by Flammarion under the title of Le Livre de cuisine de Madame Saint-Ange. Fat, and nearly square, it encompassed in more than a thousand pages the accumulated wisdom of a woman who had been writing articles for her husband’s weekly cookery newspaper since 1894. Madame Saint-Ange assumed that many of her readers would still be cooking at the hearth and on stewing stoves (potagers) and with Dutch ovens, that others would be using coal-fired cast iron stoves, and that some few advanced kitchens would be graced with gas or even electric cookers of a rather simple nature. As Amy Trubek has related so well in Haute Cuisine: How the French Invented the Culinary Profession (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), chefs in France in late nineteenth-century Paris undertook a major effort to improve the status of their trade by founding cooking schools. As elsewhere, at least as many women as men came forward to learn. Cheap weekly newspapers appeared that included lessons for their readers. Mme. Édrrard Saint-Ange wrote under a variety of pseudonyms in Le Pot-au-feu (Paris, 1893–1914), including La Vieille Catherine.

Hers is an instructional cookbook; she supplies the reader not only with recipes but with instruction in cooking techniques that are widely applicable. Anyone who cooks from her book will cook better for having used it. It is a book with a double ancestry: broadly instructional cookbooks (not simple collections of recipes) and cookbooks for home cooks. Home cooks—cuisinières bourgeois—have simpler resources than the men who cooked in restaurants. The cuisinière’s recipes are not built with the great basic preparations that Escoffier’s restaurant chefs had at their fingertips, but reflect the simpler resources of the home kitchen. The instructional ancestry includes Jules Gouffé’s Livre de Cuisine (Paris: Hachette, 1867) and Félix Urbain Dubois’s École des cuisinières (Paris: Flammarion, 1887), which had taught previous generations how to cook with great skill. The published record of the bourgeois ancestry goes back further. Nicolas de Bonnefons produced a pair of cookbooks in the mid-seventeenth century, Le Jardinier français (Paris: Pierre Des Hayes, 1651) and Les Delices de la campagne (Paris: Pierre Des Hayes, 1684), which lived on for a century in reprints and translations. Then, in 1746, François Menon published his Cuisinière bourgeois (Paris: Guillyn, 1746), which was reprinted, translated, pirated, and plagiarized for yet longer than Bonnefons’s books, ceding its dominating position in home kitchens only with the publication of Louis Eustache Audot’s Cuisinière de la campagne et de la ville (Paris: Audot, 1818).

Le Livre de cuisine de Madame Saint-Ange, therefore, has deep roots in French history and draws on something like four decades of its author’s life. It has been in print sporadically since it was first published, and many cooks in the English-speaking world have wished to see an English translation, including Samuel Chamberlain, Julia Child and both her colleagues, and many others. Mastering the Art of French Cooking would not exist if the authors had not

La Vieille Catherine.