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 Ceren 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 1827 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 1834. 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. Ébrard 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 bourgeoises—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 cuisiniers (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 bourgeoise (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...
had Saint-Ange’s example to follow. Those of us who were fortunate enough to learn from it as late as the mid-1950s will recognize our own experiences in Madeleine Kamman’s fine introductory essay in this present translation.

In some respects the book has become quaint. There are illustrations, but they are so simple that at times they are funny. A long thin stick is said to be a julienne of carrot; a flattish lump with crisscrossed marks on top is described as dough resting for two hours. They are reproduced in the present translation. There are recipes that are unlikely to appeal to the modern American cook, such as calf’s head fritters, and techniques they no longer need, such as a sorbetière, which is like the inner container of the old crank-operated ice cream machine, minus its crank. The cook simply removes the lid from time to time and stirs the mixture with a spatula. Most of us are no longer using eighteenth-century equipment. We certainly eat less butter, cream, and animal fats such as lard.

It is not clear whether the publisher and translator intended to publish this book as a historical document or a practical cookbook. As I have suggested, Mme. Saint-Ange’s voice is now speaking of practices that are a century old. Its recipes work; the dishes they produce are delicious; the extensive advice is empowering. Like so many others who encountered La Bonne Cuisine, the translator, Paul Aratow, had a revelatory experience with Saint-Ange’s book in France. As he notes in his introductory essay, he has aimed for precision in his translation, and for the most part he succeeds in this. Yet translators have the option of translating words or meanings, and despite Aratow’s evident enthusiasm for the book, his strict translation of words rather than meanings can result in bewildered readers. The novice cook, especially, needs a helping hand in the form of advice about meanings can result in bewildered readers. The novice cook, especially, needs a helping hand in the form of advice about

In 1831 Catherine Dickens, wife of the highly successful Victorian writer Charles Dickens, published a small book of menus entitled What Shall We Have for Dinner? with a collection of miscellaneous recipes attached. On first glance, this rather modest work contains nothing overly surprising and could be considered typical for the times. Since the 1840s, cookery books for the affluent middle class had been published with increasing frequency, the most important being Eliza Acton’s 1845 Modern Cookery for Private Families. In 1850 Charles Dickens himself had begun publishing the weekly Household Words, which contained articles on all aspects of domestic and culinary life. The real interest of Catherine Dickens’s menus and recipes lies in the way they illuminate culinary history as well as dinner chez Dickens. Who wouldn’t want to know more about the table of the author who took his food and drink so seriously? Susan Rossi-Wilcox, an American scholar with a strong background in the history of science and the culinary arts (she is now curatorial associate at the Botanical Museum of Harvard University and administrator for the Glass Flowers collection), does an admirable job of extracting as much as possible from Catherine’s slim work.

With meticulous attention to detail, and drawing from a wealth of sources, including the letters of Charles Dickens, Rossi-Wilcox evokes the world surrounding the great man. At times her story unfolds like one of his novels, especially when she falls into something akin to his rich, dense style. Here, for instance, is how she describes a dessert: “Standing proud were the glories of the confectioner’s art: a glistening, clear moulded jelly, an Italian cream garnished with many-hued flowers, a delicate rose-scented marble cream, and a sumptuous pink strawberry cream made with a purée of the fresh fruit” (pp.190–191).

I very much enjoyed Rossi-Wilcox’s insights into the culinary world of the time. Being German, I searched my library for a recipe for the Saxe Gotha pudding that Rossi-Wilcox contends is “a mystery” (p.297). This dessert resounded in my ears as Sächsischer Pudding. It turns out that Eliza Acton provides a recipe for it. Since this dessert is baked and not boiled, it resembles a clafoutis more than a traditional English pudding, although in the Saxon pudding tradition breadcrumbs are added to the mixture. In addition