Le Cuisinier de Talleyrand: Meurtre au congrès de Vienne  
Jean-Christophe Duchon-Doris  
Paris: Julliard, 2006  
297 pp. 19€ (paper)

Natures mortes au Vatican: Roman noir et gastronomique en Italie à la Renaissance  
Michèle Barrière  
271 pp. 19€ (paper)

The multisensory nature of cuisine lends itself to forms of artistic expression that reach far beyond the aura of a chef’s kitchen. Whether refined or rudimentary, as object or sign, its representation in the visual and literary fields (or a cross between the two, as in film) provides a rich repast. While arguably less deserving of attention than some of its nobler relatives, the low-brow culinary mystery, along with its catchy titles, has gained prominence of late in popular literature, foreshadowed to an extent by Georges Simenon’s commissaire Maigret, whose escapades seemingly lead him from one eating place to the next. In the plethora of Maigret mysteries, however, cookery and eating are merely part of the décor rather than active agents in the search for foul play. More recently, such authors as Nancy Fairbanks (Chocolate Quake), Ellen Hart (Dial M for Meatloaf), and well-known food critic Phyllis Richman (The Butter Did It, Murder on the Gravy Train, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Ham?) have turned food, cookery, and/or chefs into active ingredients of detection or demystification. Not surprisingly, the French variant, at times familiarly labeled polar bouffe (foodie detective story), has also made a name for itself of late, as with Pierre Leretier and Jean-Pierre Xiradakis’s Fricassée de meurtres à la bordelaise (Paris: Table Ronde, 1994) or Le Boloc’h and Marchesseau’s a.o.c. Assassinats d’origine contrôlée (Neuilly–sur-Seine: Michel Lafon, 2007). More interestingly, especially for food historians, some of these works are set in the past and dwell on feats of period cookery, as is the case for the two books under review.

Le Cuisinier de Talleyrand spins a web of intrigue rife with suspense, has the requisite surprise ending, and is loaded with spicy ingredients. The investigator in charge is the illegitimate son of a prince. Its setting is the Congress of Vienna (1814–1815) and its high-end aristocratic décor; the protagonist and prime suspect is the famed Carême. There are many kitchen scenes, and culinary items such as macarons, or kitchen utensils—in this case a meat cleaver—are woven into a plot that begins with a murder, revolves around rumors of a Napoleonic comeback, and has its share of bed scenes and secret sects at a moment in history when the future of Europe is at stake. The mystery’s high point, from a culinary perspective, is the banquet hosted by Talleyrand at his Vienna lodgings, attended by the current power players of Europe and several femmes fatales. Amid the odorous wafts of dishes prepared by Carême (at that point under house arrest)—including such gems as a ragoût d’escalopes de foie gras, timbales de truffes, and an esturgeon poché au vin de Champagne, all served with their accompanying wines—followed by the equally powerful aromas of select cigars blending with those of fine liqueurs around a game of whist, the art of Talleyrand’s table diplomacy reigns supreme, even though he is the political underdog. Who, exclaims author Jean-Christophe Duchon-Doris, would want to humiliate a country displaying such refined art de vivre (p.168)?

Cuisinier does have one weak point: the author sometimes gets his culinary facts wrong. For example, the recurring term faitout, designating a type of cooking pot, doesn’t come into use until much later in the century; Hermitage designates a Rhône Valley rather than a Burgundy wine; sugar is filé, not effilé. There is also a whole paragraph (p.113) lifted without quotes or acknowledgment from the preface of Dons de Comus (1739). Aside from these shortcomings, Cuisinier is a great read. It has recently been re-edited (Paris: Ed. 10/18, 2007).
Michèle Barrière’s *Natures mortes au Vatican* takes us back to mid-sixteenth-century Italy, when princes of the Church were all powerful. Once again, the focus of things culinary is an immortalized real-life chef, Bartolomeo Scappi, who served three popes, and whose six-part cookbook, *Opera*, was first published in 1570. In *Natures mortes* one finds murders (albeit not related to the central plot), unorthodox rituals in the esoteric Bomarzo gardens, the mysterious disappearance of the artist Arcimboldo, the villainous and corrupt French cardinal Granvelle with his limitless appetite for collecting works of art, and an amateur sleuth named François, who happens to be Scappi’s head assistant and secretary (he is also the lead character in a previous volume of this saga). While François, rather than the aging Scappi, is as feverishly involved in the preparation of a lavish banquet as is Carême in *Cuisinier*, *Natures mortes*’ prandial high point is not the focus of Barrière’s concern. Rather, she highlights Scappi’s compulsive dedication to his culinary calling and his intense commitment to handing over his knowledge to posterity via his *Opera*, turning the art of cuisine into a veritable religion (meant perhaps to counter the tainted religion of the Church). While her plot line lacks *Cuisinier*’s suspenseful drama and surprise ending, her *roman noir* is full of spotless erudition as concerns not only the world of cookery but also the novel’s Renaissance settings, primarily Rome, Naples, and their surroundings. The reader’s feeling of being *in situ* is further enhanced by the many true-life artists worked into the narration, quite aside from the disappearing and reappearing Arcimboldo. Barrière is definitely on top of her subject matter and even provides appendices, where facts are separated from fiction in entries on persons and places. Most significantly, in an epilogue of Bartolomeo Scappi recipes she breaches the fact-fiction gap by providing (modernized) recipes for twenty-seven dishes served in *Natures mortes*.¹

In Barrière’s mystery, the elusive artist Arcimboldo is central to the plot: Cardinal Granvelle has him kidnapped and hidden, the better to seize his completed portraits, but François finds him, and the cardinal’s wiles are exposed. One of Arcimboldo’s food-structured portraits also is vital to the plot. A fleeing François manages to smuggle some of Arcimboldo’s artwork into the Calvinist city of Geneva, where he is put on trial for *lèse majesté*, his crime being the possession of a portrait titled *The Jurist*, whose facial parts consist of fish and chicken pieces.² The portrait is eminently satirical and bears an uncanny resemblance to Calvin, hence the sharp reaction of Geneva’s good citizens. While all turns out well in the end, the author uses this portrait to throw darts at fundamental Protestantism, just as she had previously attacked the foibles of the Church of Rome.

Both *Cuisinier* and *Natures mortes* provide us with intriguing perspectives on the role played by great chefs during seminal periods in culinary history. They also add a dab of what so often lacks in standard accounts of these creative performing artists, their three-dimensionality, reminding us that we are dealing with beings who are quite human, as well as humane. A critique of the social environment—in one case stiff, showy, and rather stale; in the other pervaded by religious dictates and power-plays—further enhances the cultural context of both works.●

**NOTES**

1. In June 2007 the Paris-based SADF (Société des amis de Jean-Louis Flandrin) held its annual banquet based on recipes drawn from Scappi’s *Opera*. Consult *Culinary Biographies*, Alice Arndt, ed. (Houston: Yes Press, 2006), for entries on Scappi (333–334, by Ken Alhala) and Carême (89–91, by Priscilla Ferguson).

2. This is, in fact, a very real portrait, recently on exhibit in Paris’s Luxembourg Museum, but the intent to take a jab at Calvin, while long rumored, has been discounted of late by art historians.