In This Issue

Eating India: An Odyssey into the Food and Culture of the Land of Spices
Chitrita Banerji

The Taste of Conquest: The Rise and Fall of the Three Great Cities of Spice
Michael Krondl

The Herbalist in the Kitchen
Gary Allen

The Downright Epicure: Essays on Edward Bunyard (1878–1939)
Edited by Edward Wilson

The Royal Garden of Pefkou: A Study of Fruit Consumption in Medieval Nicosia
William Woyos Weaver

Arranging the Meal: A History of Table Service in France
Jean-Louis Flandrin

The Culture of Food: The Dialectic of Material Conditions, Art, and Leisure
Edited by Matti Ikonen, Gary Backhaus, V.A. Heikkinen, Chris Nagel, and Sam Inkinen

The Lost Ravioli Recipes of Hoboken: A Search for Food and Identity
Laura Schenone

C. Anne Wilson

The Way to Make Wine: How to Craft Superb Table Wines at Home
Sheridan Warrick

International Politics of Genetically Modified Food: Diplomacy, Trade and Law
Edited by Robert Falkner

The River Cottage Meat Book
Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall

Tea Cult of Japan: An Aesthetic Pastime
Yasunosuke Fukukita

The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese Food
Jennifer 8. Lee

The Grand Literary Cafés of Europe
Noel Riley Fitch

Soul of the City: The Pike Place Public Market
Alice Shoret and Murray Morgan

Eating India: An Odyssey into the Food and Culture of the Land of Spices
Chitrita Banerji

New York: Bloomsbury, 2007
304 pp. $24.95 (cloth)

A few years ago, when I learned that I would be going to India, a piece of music burst into mind. It was not Indian but a great piece of Romantic Orientalism, written in Russian, and rendered in Swedish: “The Indian Merchant’s Song” from Rimsky-Korsakov’s opera Sadko, sung by the incomparable Jussi Björling. It is a song of exotic expectation, of memories to come, that would never be forgotten.

In like manner, expectation and memory are main themes of Chitrita Banerji’s journey through India, as described in her latest book, Eating India: An Odyssey into the Food and Culture of the Land of Spices. At the end of a journey that began in her native Calcutta, Banerji recalls a meal eaten in that city years before. Her uncle had taken the family to a Kashmiri restaurant. Until then, Kashmir had been for her a place of legends only read about in books or travelers’ tales. That distant land was made real by the dinner, particularly a rogan josh like no other: “An unfamiliar, yet luscious combination of ginger, asafetida, fennel, fenugreek, red chilies, yogurt, and ghee in the sauce opened the door to pleasures that were later magnified by each recall” (p.255). As a melody might bring back a place in time, so does a specific dish for a wonderful food writer.

Neither a travelogue nor a recipe book (though one would love to have a go in the kitchen at some of the dishes mentioned here), this is a personal journey to more than a dozen regions of India. The question posed is “...to see

© 2008 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Rights and Permissions Web site, http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp. DOI: 10.1525/gfc.2008.8.3.108.
how much authenticity in food and cookery could possibly survive in the changing young-old, immigrant nation that is India” (n.p.). By “authenticity” the author means dishes that are rooted in a region’s ecology—both natural and human—or, if “new” (and in India that might mean several hundred years old), then fitting into that region’s cultural taste. In the latter sense one might find the northern-based biryani in southern India but with native ingredients and cooking techniques. Of course, the word also means “memory,” so wherever Banerji goes she talks with people who remember the old ways and, best of all, often visits the food places where authenticity lies—among the common people.

The journey begins in her home state of Bengal, at a relative’s wedding, preceded on a long flight from Boston by memories of fish dishes derived from the rivers and Bay of Bengal. At the wedding Banerji observes the wedding feast being prepared in huge kadhai, or cooking pots, and presided over by an elderly master chef—a cooking technique that verges on the amazing, especially the results. This is the launchpad for a discussion of Bengali food traditions, from ingredients to cooking techniques and medicinal theory, all within historical contexts. This is food writing at its best, historically and culinarily informative, not overwrought taste description as some writing tends to be (do flavors always explode in the mouth, do our mouths always water, like dogs?), and filled with the interestingly personal.

It is impossible to fully implement the book’s stated purpose, since there cannot be a nation more richly complex on all levels, from languages, cultures, and cuisines, than India. And it is ever changing. The degree of absorption of some of the new into India’s many traditions is probably the best that one can chronicle in a small volume. Banerji wisely does this by dropping in on places she visited previously and others with which she is less familiar, often visiting friends who act as culinary guides. In each, she picks some signature food or dish as the basis for judging changes. For Gujarat, it is vegetables, this region having the largest concentration of vegetarians in India; in Benares (the description of this city is especially good), milk; lamb in Hyderabad on the Deccan Plateau; or sweets in Bengal, home to India’s greatest dessert-makers. Like many Indians, the author has a serious sweet tooth, and her description of the differences in ingredients among different dessert traditions is illuminating.

Not that this kind of description is new. For instance, most descriptions of Goa’s cuisine mention Portuguese influences, vindaloo deriving from the Portuguese vinho, or wine. A visit to Kerala goes into the now de rigueur discussion of the three main religious traditions and their foods, along with a nice discourse on India’s Jews. All are introduced by some history, potted by necessity of space, but what distinguishes this work from others is how well integrated the treatment of food—individual dishes—is within their historical/cultural contexts. Here in Kerala, we read about the nature of the sublime Anglo-Keralite dish, fish mollī; or, when it comes to the Mughal cuisine of Agra, a description for making samosas from a seventeenth-century Persian cookery manual. And, this is one of the few books to attempt discussions of the food of India’s indigenous tribal peoples, especially those of the northeastern states. How about hindol or shindol, sauces made of freshwater fish, salted and fermented for some months? Are they connected to Southeast Asia? Such is the stuff of interesting dining, thinking, and reading.

There are only a few quibbles with Eating India. While the book can certainly be read by a general audience, many of the names of dishes will bewilder the reader, no matter how good the descriptions in plain English terms are. It is the nature of the Indian beast, but readers should be at least a little familiar with Indian food terms and traditions, even if from the standard Indian restaurant (Banerji has a nice discussion of the term “curry”). And last, the partition of the subcontinent was painful all around, but Pakistan is not a theocracy, at least not yet.

—Bruce Kraig, professor emeritus, Roosevelt University