Spices are an endless source of fascination for both cooks and historians. Popular histories on the spice trade seem to be published every year, such as Charles Corn’s *The Scents of Eden: A History of the Spice Trade*, Andrew Dalby’s *Dangerous Tastes*, and Jack Turner’s *Spice: The History of a Temptation*. Important scholarly studies also continue to come out, such as Patricia Crone’s *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*. Nevertheless, even with Krondl’s addition we still await the definitive book on spices and the spice trade.

Krondl’s approach is to tell the story of the rise and fall of three great entrepôts, Lisbon, Venice, and Amsterdam. He offers a novel reason for tackling this complex story: “I am not a specialist, which, because of the nature of this book, may have been an advantage” (p.vii). Unfortunately, in this case, it’s a liability.

Like a pendulum we swing between present day and the Middle Ages as Krondl tells the story of the successive role these three cities played. Historians ranging from Fernand Braudel to Massimo Montanari, and many more in between, have all commented on the extraordinary amounts of spices used in medieval cooking, but Krondl finds their wonder a failure of imagination and wishes to take these “academics,” as he calls them, to an Indian restaurant in London to see how such spices could be used. This is one of the most ridiculous criticisms I’ve ever read; it is not germane to the story of spices and smacks of anti-intellectualism. Furthermore, it isn’t true that a modern Indian restaurant in London uses the quantity of spices that was used in the thirteenth century.

This kind of criticism appears not to be an anomaly as Krondl goes on to criticize “economic historians” for having written that spices were used as a preservative when we all know spices were never so used. No names are mentioned, but this is something of a straw man, as I’m familiar with only one academic historian who makes this false comment, almost as a throwaway line, and it is a minor issue, anyway, when we talk about the trade in spices.

The whiff of those eggheads who just can’t get it straight permeates Krondl’s book, as in the comment “I figured if the academics didn’t have the answers, maybe a ghost could give some clues.” Later (p.147), he says that “academic historians... get all stiff and tweedy when you suggest that people will go to all ends for the sake of their religion.” Nowhere does he tell us who these people are. But let’s pause here for a minute to look at Krondl’s research, which, after all, must be based on these academic historians with whom he is unhappy. The literature on the medieval spice trade is huge. Anyone attempting to contribute to this wide field of study must review the most important works on spices. These are Braudel, of course, and, most importantly, Crone. There are also Disney, Lane, Heyd, Fischel, Steensgaard, Ashtor, Meilink-Roelofsz, and several others. In fact, a bibliography of the spice trade published in 1994 runs to two hundred pages. If Krondl’s bibliography is any guide, he has not consulted the works mentioned except for Ashtor and Lane, and he seems completely ignorant of Crone’s crucial argument. Although Braudel is mentioned once on page 4, none of his works are consulted. Frederic C. Lane is mentioned in Krondl’s bibliography, but only one book of Lane’s enormous research on spices appears there, and it is not even the most important one. There is a very good reason why being a specialist is important in writing about the spice trade, and Krondl has inadvertently shown us why.

Krondl gets many things wrong. I will mention only a few, such as his implication that the Crusaders were responsible for spice use in Christian Europe (pp.17, 57). Had he consulted Runciman, the great historian of the Crusades, he would have learned that this isn’t true. And what are we to make of the fact that the Egyptian dynasty of the Mamluks is not mentioned once in this book, when Venice’s dominance in the spice trade virtually depended on the Venetians’ good relations with that Muslim dynasty?

Krondl uses awkward expressions that shake our confidence in his ability to tell a compelling and informative story. His description of the first Crusades as “Catholic jihads” is grating (pp.17, 202). His characterization of the Dutch as “Hollanders” (p.21) is just too weird to comment on further. And the way he describes Galen, the second-century Greek physician, as having started his career in the “er of a gladiator school in Asia Minor” for me demonstrates a lack of seriousness. A “cantar,” a measurement, is about 110 pounds, not 90 pounds, and had Krondl consulted Crone he would know that spices did not pass through Mecca on their way to Europe (p.76). Krondl also misunderstands Braudel’s use of the term “spice orgy.” “Scholars who speak of an ‘orgy of spice’ are talking through their hats,” Krondl tells us, unaware, it seems, that Braudel was talking about the trade in spices, not their culinary uses (p.78). Krondl simply assumes that spices were consumed in cooking, without ever exploring the possibility that the majority of spices were not used for culinary purposes (p.82).
On the level of analysis, Krondl also falls short, a problem he probably could have avoided had he read the literature of those pesky academics. For instance, he argues that pepper imports did not keep pace with population increase in the early fifteenth century (p.256). But research indicates that pepper imports increased at a higher rate than population growth in this period.

Can anything positive be said about Krondl’s book? Yes, certainly. His chapter on Amsterdam is quite good, and his explanation of Galenic theory is excellent. Had he paid as much attention to the rest of the story this could have been a much better book. In fairness, Krondl took on a complex project that has defeated many before him.

—Clifford A. Wright, Santa Monica, CA

NOTES


2. Meiōnki-Roelets, Asian Trade, 89.

The Herbalist in the Kitchen

Gary Allen

Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007

xiv + 483pp. Illustrations. $65.00 (cloth)

This well-researched, well-documented book on plants used in the preparation of food and drink is maddeningly difficult to use: there is no index of herbs and spices by either their common or Latin names. Gary Allen approaches his subject from the perspective of a botanist; all plants are grouped alphabetically within their botanical family. This means that the only way for the average cook to find a particular herb or spice is to read laboriously through the contents pages, checking the small print carefully. Even knowing the Latin name for the plant doesn’t help, because this is not always obviously related to the family name. Allen includes the names of plants in as many languages as he has been able to find, which may be useful for the traveler in search of an ingredient in a foreign market, but a foreign national, or a returned traveler wanting to find an English name for a particular plant, would find this book too tiresome to consult. Cross-references without page numbers are equally annoying.

That said, it is useful to know which plants belong to the same family, and this enables cooks to see to what extent they bear family resemblance. Once you start reading, Allen displays a broad knowledge of his subject. He almost always gives the chemical compounds responsible for the aroma and flavor profile of the plants, which is helpful in recognizing similarities with other herbs and spices, and when thinking about complementary flavors.

The scope of the book is wide. It is very thorough on popular herbs and spices such as basil, mint, chile, pepper, clove, nutmeg. For some, such as rosemary, Allen suggests the best culinary cultivars. However, pursuing botanical accuracy, he neglects to include mace as a separate spice from nutmeg within the contents list, and cubeb, long pepper, and pepper leaves can be found only if the reader knows to look under “pepper.” Such absences are irritating for the nonbotanist.

A substantial part of the book reminds us that plants we may not usually think of as flavorings can have a role in the kitchen: roses, violets, marigolds, and other scented flowers. Dried rosebuds, petals and rosewater are widely used in Middle Eastern cooking, and fresh petals flavor English salads and desserts. On a visit to the Republic of Georgia a few years ago, I found dried French marigold petals, Tagetes patula, sold in markets everywhere. They are an essential flavoring, a key component of khmeli-suneli, a Georgian (not Russian, as Allen has it) aromatic blend that includes dried mint, dill, savory, and fenugreek with coriander and fennel seed.

There are plants we now neglect—amaranth, nettles, dandelions (excellent blanched under a flower pot as well as eaten green), alexanders, mallows, sea kale—that are worth reclaiming. Some plants sound tempting and intriguing—stevia, frangipani, skullcap, myrrh, maidenhair fern—but most of these offer little for the domestic cook; their use is minimal and mostly restricted to manufactured food and drinks. The use of others is essentially medicinal—boldo, echinacea, and St. John’s wort, for example, while the FDA limits the use of yet others to alcoholic drinks only.

The Herbalist in the Kitchen

Gary Allen

Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007

xiv + 483pp. Illustrations. $65.00 (cloth)

This well-researched, well-documented book on plants used in the preparation of food and drink is maddeningly difficult to use: there is no index of herbs and spices by either their common or Latin names. Gary Allen approaches his subject from the perspective of a botanist; all plants are grouped alphabetically within their botanical family. This means that the only way for the average cook to find a particular herb or spice is to read laboriously through the contents pages, checking the small print carefully. Even knowing the Latin name for the plant doesn’t help, because this is not always obviously related to the family name. Allen includes the names of plants in as many languages as he has been able to find, which may be useful for the traveler in search of an ingredient in a foreign market, but a foreign national, or a returned traveler wanting to find an English name for a particular plant, would find this book too tiresome to consult. Cross-references without page numbers are equally annoying.

That said, it is useful to know which plants belong to the same family, and this enables cooks to see to what extent they bear family resemblance. Once you start reading, Allen displays a broad knowledge of his subject. He almost always gives the chemical compounds responsible for the aroma and flavor profile of the plants, which is helpful in recognizing similarities with other herbs and spices, and when thinking about complementary flavors.

The scope of the book is wide. It is very thorough on popular herbs and spices such as basil, mint, chile, pepper, clove, nutmeg. For some, such as rosemary, Allen suggests the best culinary cultivars. However, pursuing botanical accuracy, he neglects to include mace as a separate spice from nutmeg within the contents list, and cubeb, long pepper, and pepper leaves can be found only if the reader knows to look under “pepper.” Such absences are irritating for the nonbotanist.

A substantial part of the book reminds us that plants we may not usually think of as flavorings can have a role in the kitchen: roses, violets, marigolds, and other scented flowers. Dried rosebuds, petals and rosewater are widely used in Middle Eastern cooking, and fresh petals flavor English salads and desserts. On a visit to the Republic of Georgia a few years ago, I found dried French marigold petals, Tagetes patula, sold in markets everywhere. They are an essential flavoring, a key component of khmeli-suneli, a Georgian (not Russian, as Allen has it) aromatic blend that includes dried mint, dill, savory, and fenugreek with coriander and fennel seed.

There are plants we now neglect—amaranth, nettles, dandelions (excellent blanched under a flower pot as well as eaten green), alexanders, mallows, sea kale—that are worth reclaiming. Some plants sound tempting and intriguing—stevia, frangipani, skullcap, myrrh, maidenhair fern—but most of these offer little for the domestic cook; their use is minimal and mostly restricted to manufactured food and drinks. The use of others is essentially medicinal—boldo, echinacea, and St. John’s wort, for example, while the FDA limits the use of yet others to alcoholic drinks only.