Arranging the Meal: A History of Table Service in France
Jean-Louis Flandrin; translated by Julie E. Johnson, with Sylvie and Antonio Roder; foreword to the English-language edition by Beatrice Fink
Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007
229 pp. $34.95 (cloth)

Jean-Louis Flandrin, eminent historian, teacher, and gastronome, died in 2001. We now have one final volume of his work in Arranging the Meal: A History of Table Service in France. His was a long and distinguished career. He was a member of the Annales School of historical research, so-named for its principal publication, Annales: Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations, founded in the interwar period by Lucien Fèvre and Marc Bloch. The demographers of the INED (Institut national des études démographiques) and the scholars of the Annales School pioneered the application of mathematical analysis to hitherto-neglected documents, notarial documents, censuses, inventories, and similar materials. Flandrin first distinguished himself with his work on the history of the family and of sexuality, including Families in Former Times: Kinship, Household and Sexuality, from 1979.

Subsequently he turned his considerable skills to the study of food history, particularly but not exclusively in France, and he began to subject culinary sources to quantitative analysis. For three decades a steady flow of essays appeared in learned journals: papers on the variation in proportions of specific foodstuffs (notably, sugar) in manuscripts and early printed cookbooks, on the influence of humoral theory on the making and ordering of menus, and more. With Massimo Montanari he published L’Histoire de l’alimentation (Paris: Fayard, 1996), published in the United States as Food: A Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). Flandrin’s introductory essays to several parts of that notable collective work are the closest he came to giving us a synthetic history of cookery and gastronomy.

The material in this present volume was to have moved beyond these earlier works by extending his studies in time down to the present day, and geographically to include much of Western Europe; the volume would have concluded with that synthetic overview. It is unfortunate that Flandrin’s untimely death deprived us of these insights. In his foreword to L’Ordre des mets (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2002), the French edition of this present work, Georges Carantino explains that Flandrin had written three-quarters of the book before his death. Carantino and others who were familiar with Flandrin’s work and thought have filled in the remainder of it with such outlines and notes as survive. As it is, we have Flandrin’s chapters on the “classical” meal as it evolved from the fourteenth to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, on both meat days and fast days, on its components—roasts, entrées, and entremets—and the sequence of dishes. His principal sources are menus, both of actual meals and of ideal ones; such manuscripts as survive from the Middle Ages; and printed cookbooks, which in the case of the first century of printing, often included substantial numbers of more or less accurately transcribed medieval recipes. The work of his students and associates has also considerably enriched this present volume.

Flandrin’s application of quantitative analysis to the study of cookbooks has yielded some interesting results. For example, he found that in the sixteenth-century cookbooks published in France, sugar is most often used, beyond confectionery, with fish. This practice would accord with the Galenic belief that the potential harmfulness of fish, whose humors are cold and moist, would be tempered by the heat and dryness of sugar. Unfortunately, the cookbook evidence is, in my opinion, too slender to support a heavy burden of generalization based on quantification. In the ancien régime, French cooks, even male cooks, were rarely literate, and in any event they came to knowledge of their craft by means of an apprentice system. Cookbooks were more likely to be used by the managers of substantial households—stewards in the cases of the grander establishments, and middle- or upper-class women and their female householders in smaller households. They would have turned to cookbooks not for instruction in cooking everyday foods, but for extraordinary ones. The text of the Viandier attributed to Taillevent concludes that the author does not include recipes for ordinary dishes, such as “stewed chard, cabbage, turnip greens, leeks, veal in yellow sauce and plain shallot pottage…” because “women are experts with these and anyone knows how to do them; as for tripe, which I have not put in my recipe book, it is common knowledge how it is to be eaten.” Moreover, in cookbooks one often sees references to items that were unlikely to be available at all. The tendency of writers to claim knowledge beyond their experience has never died out. In the 1938 edition of the Larousse Gastronomique the reader is told to cook aurochs “like beef,” although the aurochs is believed to have gone extinct in 1627. Counting recipes may tell us something...
about the people who write cookbooks and the people who buy them, but it cannot tell us about real-world practice.

Flandrin’s graphs leave much to be desired. For example, in a discussion of the separation of sweet and savory dishes that took place after the Middle Ages, he displays a graph showing a rise in the percentage of dishes containing sugar, using an unidentified selection of cookbooks, both manuscript and printed, from France, England, and Italy, from the fourteenth century to a peak in the sixteenth and then a decline in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (fig. 5, p.81). There were few culinary texts in the period before the eighteenth century, and those that did exist were often very closely interrelated, and the recipes very old when first published. There are no Italian cookbooks represented after the sixteenth century. Moreover, the falling-off of sugar percentages in eighteenth-century cookbooks is more than compensated for by the publication of specialized works on confectionery. Thus, it is difficult to rely on Flandrin’s analysis.

In his discussion of the order in which foods of differing nutritional qualities and methods of preparation were presented to diners, Flandrin describes four major periods: the medieval meal service; the Renaissance phase in the sixteenth century; what might be called the “baroque” period in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which saw the formation of the “classical” service à la française (in which dishes were arranged on the table in a symmetrical pattern that was repeated in two or more successive courses); and the nineteenth century, dominated at the beginning by the rise of gastronomical discourse, and including the replacement of service à la française with service à la russe (in which the presentation of dishes proceeded sequentially in time).

Nevertheless, Arranging the Table is a good introduction to Flandrin’s thought. His writings appeared in so many widely dispersed journals, so many proceedings of conferences, and, we now realize, in so many plans that were cut off by his death, that few people, especially in the English-speaking world, have had an opportunity to learn from him. He was always a teacher as well as a researcher; as Beatrice Fink observes in her intelligent foreword to the English translation, “one should have a bit of appetite left when leaving the table.” It is well that we should have this stimulant to scholarly appetite.

—Barbara Ketcham Wheaton, author, Savoring the Past

NOTES

The Culture of Food: The Dialectic of Material Conditions, Art, and Leisure
Edited by Matti Itkonen, Gary Backhaus, V.A. Heikkinen, Chris Nagel, and Sam Inkinnen
Jyväskylä, Finland: University of Jyväskylä, and Helsinki: Haaga University of Applied Sciences, 2006
(available from kirjamyynti@kampusdata.fi)
312 pp. Illustrations. 50€ (paper)

“Either there is a meaningful relation at the core of our experiences of food and eating, which can be investigated and described on the basis of the culture(s) of food, or else there is nothing here to understand other than the production of food and the science of nutrition and sensation” (p.33). This dialectic, posed in the introduction to The Culture of Food, sets the tone of the book’s internal investigations: a medley of engaging, scholastically critical essays juxtaposed by a couple of entries that, unfortunately, feel like self-indulgent, free-association musings. The reader’s brain must engage in mental gymnastics as she moves from reading a rococo, descriptive essay about a three-course meal that, at times, reads like an etiquette manual, to the subsequent chapter in which the author quotes Shakespeare, Marx, and Mao Zedong. Despite this inconsistency, the anthology deserves consideration.

The Culture of Food is a rumination about the phenomenology of food; that is, about the science and study of food. Its authors do not consider food as sustenance, but perceptions and experiences of food as part of diverse totalized experiences, from restaurants to popular culture, in the mouth and in the mind. Sound a bit heady? For those of us with only rudimentary training in philosophy, philosophical texts can quickly become intellectual quagmires. Such is rarely the case in this anthology, the majority of which consists of thought-provoking philosophical meditations and critical interpretations on food-centered experiences.

“Food as Process: A Genetic Phenomenology,” for example, takes an intellectual step back to ask fundamental questions about somatic experience, including, importantly, “What is food?” To answer that question Gary Backhaus, a philosopher affiliated with Loyola College in Maryland, presents an excellent discussion on “meaning-constitution and the ontology of food.” Jonathan Wender, a Washington State–based social philosopher and criminologist, expounds on ontological contingencies that comprise what he terms “the poetics of eating” (interestingly, his forthcoming book is titled Policing as Poetry).

Among the chapters are several explorations of food in popular culture forms, including a Finnish women’s