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La Varenne’s Cookery: The French Cook; The French Pastry Chef; The French Confectioner
François Pierre, Sieur de La Varenne
Translation and Commentary by Terence Scully
Totnes, Devon: Prospect Books, 2006
628 pp. Illustrations. £40.00 (cloth)

The supportable factual knowledge about the life and work of William Shakespeare is, I think, inversely proportional to the amount that has been and continues to be written about him. The same applies, on an infinitely smaller scale, to the cook François Pierre, also known as La Varenne, author of Le Cuisinier François, first published in Paris in 1651.

The uncertainty begins with La Varenne’s very name (and not just the spelling, as is the case with Shakespeare). It turns up on various editions of his Cuisinier as François Pierre, Sieur de La Varenne (meaning that he is the owner of a property called La Varenne), and as François Pierre, dit La Varenne (which would imply that he is called La Varenne, perhaps as a nickname). Uncertainty also surrounds the question of which books La Varenne did and did not write. His name appears legitimately on one work, Le Cuisinier François. Some people give him credit for at least one and perhaps two or three other books published during the decade following Cuisinier. One questionable attribution is Le Pastissier François (Paris, 1653), and a highly doubtful attribution is Le Confiturier François (Paris, 1660?). Some of the confusion over La Varenne’s œuvre results from the nature of the book trade in seventeenth-century France and the publishers’ penchant for recombining different books in re-editions, onto which they sometimes even slapped the name of a popular author to sell more copies. Publishers, not authors, owned the texts they printed. And while the title of the book under review here claims La Varenne as the author of the three works, the compiler, Terence Scully, admits that for the last text “there are only very tenuous grounds for suggesting that the book ever had anything at all to do with La Varenne” (p.40).
However, in the pages that follow, Scully simply attributes all three books to La Varenne and describes the recipes as La Varenne’s cooking. What is a reader to think? At the least, the reader must carefully evaluate Scully’s conclusions, as he hardly seems to stand by them.

Scully’s long introduction does contain helpful historical context. Unfortunately, the reader must wade through some old canards, including the one about Catherine de’ Medici’s cooks—a tale that has been shredded of every last vestige of believability by a number of scholarly culinary historians—and a few red herrings, such as Scully’s chasing down the origins of words by means of convoluted logic and speculation, without ever arriving at satisfactory conclusions. Yet the book has some positive attributes. He three works included here are excellent examples of seventeenth-century cookbooks, and we are lucky to have them translated into English and published for modern readers by Prospect Books. This British publishing house, founded by the late Alan Davidson, has done historians an enormous service in its numerous reprints and facsimiles of antiquarian cookbooks that most of us could never dream of owning in the original.

Like reading itself, all translation is interpretation. If anyone is aware of this, it is Scully. Working with old texts presents many questions about how much to modernize recipes for today’s readers and how far one can go while still remaining faithful to the original text. Either way, the result will be at times a bit awkward. Scully’s translation is accompanied by extensive footnotes to help the modern reader navigate the shoals of seventeenth-century French. The very detailed glossing of the original works, using a number of sources, required extensive work on Scully’s part and demonstrates with admirable transparency just how complex the translator’s job is. It is an unusual decision to include remarks on the contemporary English translations of both Cuisinier (The French Cook, London, 1653) and Pastissier (The Perfect Cook, London, 1656) in the introduction and in the glosses. Finally, instead of a single standard index, Scully supplies six appendices that categorize and index various elements from the three texts, including Ingredients, Preparations, Kitchen Equipment, and Weights and Measures.

Has Scully translated these recipes so that we can cook them today? It is more his goal to bring today’s historian or cook into a seventeenth-century kitchen than to put seventeenth-century food on our tables. But there is nothing for learning about historical recipes like getting into the kitchen and grappling with a few.

—Kyri Claflin, Boston University

Danish Cookbooks: Domesticity and National Identity, 1616–1901
Carol Gold
x + 220 pp. $24.95 (paper)

One of the most beloved traditional Danish desserts is rødgrød med fløde, a simple red fruit pudding typically made from raspberries and currants and served with cream and a sprinkle of crunchy sugar. Rødgrød has a jewel-like brilliance that is made more striking by the streaks of white cream running over it. This colorful dish has often been likened to the much-loved red and white Danish flag. In my own extended family, the presentation of rødgrød often prompted the fond remark, “It’s as Danish as Dannebrog!” (the Danish standard). Carol Gold’s thorough study of three centuries of Danish cookbooks provides historical context to this seemingly trivial flash of national pride at the table. More important, Gold locates in the pages of these cookbooks the fascinating markers of social, economic, and political changes in Denmark.

Danish Cookbooks: Domesticity and National Identity, 1616–1901 examines approximately 150 cookbooks published in Denmark between 1616, when the first cookbook was published in that country, and 1901, the year the popular