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
and much-reprinted Miss Jensen’s Cookbook first appeared. Gold, an historian, begins her work with the premise that cookbooks “tell stories” about a society. In probing what these stories might be, she considers the audience addressed by the cookbooks, presumptions of literacy and numeracy, changes in ingredients and methods of preparing foods, and the use of commentary. The trends she charts in Danish cookbooks are signals of important changes in Danish society: the emergence of a bourgeois consciousness, the related development of the middle-class “cult of domesticity,” the evolution of nationalism, and the emergence of a Danish identity. Gold’s analysis underscores the dual role of the cookbook in reflecting and advancing these social changes.

The earliest Danish cookbooks functioned as “aides mémorires” (p.56) for professional chefs—male and female—employed by aristocratic households; the authors, mostly male, assumed that the cook was familiar with the dish and how it ought to taste. Around the turn of the nineteenth century Danish cookbooks began evolving into prescriptive literature. Written by both men and women but addressing mostly women, these books offered recipes aimed at nonprofessional cooks but also began to include advice on managing a household and domestic staff. Such commentaries mirrored and promoted a growing bourgeois consciousness that valued thrift, cleanliness, and order (among other traits). Gold argues that the discussion of domesticity in cookbooks of this period can be seen in the context of peasants moving into the middle class, as well as a larger movement that was creating separate, and gendered, spheres for men and women. Alongside bourgeois dictates were new and impassioned discussions of what constitutes Danish cuisine and the importance of using Danish products rather than imports. Gold places this discourse in the context of a rising nationalism that arose from Denmark’s loss of empire and subsequent evolution into a nation-state. Here, Gold has found a significant new story in cookbooks: the presence of nationalism in nineteenth-century Danish kitchens, which suggests a more nuanced reading of male and female spheres in that period.

By the second half of the nineteenth century Danish cookbooks were mostly written by women and addressed housewives running smaller households. These books dropped most of their didacticism and focused on recipes while assuming a greater familiarity with cooking techniques. Gold argues that the underpinnings of a well-run kitchen were no longer a specific topic of discussion because the social changes surrounding domesticity had already occurred. She gives supporting evidence from a cookbook that assumes, but does not elaborate on, certain kitchen protocols practiced by the reader. She notes that “societies do not often write about what is universally accepted” (p.84), but additional evidence here would have strengthened her argument. At the same time, nationalistic sentiments also disappeared from the pages of later nineteenth-century cookbooks. Gold again asserts that this absence of discussion signals the full assimilation of nationalism pride in Danish cuisine; here she introduces persuasive evidence from multiple sources, along with a compelling historical context.

Danish Cookbooks is delightfully organized in the manner of a multicourse meal. The first chapter, “Appetizer,” contains a selection of illustrated frontispieces that form a cogent visual introduction to Gold’s argument. Included here is the frontispiece from the first Danish cookbook of 1616, which shows a professional female chef at work. An 1804 frontispiece depicts a well-managed kitchen staff in an aristocratic household, while mid- and late-nineteenth-century examples show women who are cooking or shopping for their own households. Of particular note is the gaze of the female subjects: the 1616 woman comfortably meets the eye of the viewer/reader, but by the late nineteenth century women are more demure and do not engage the viewer. Subsequent chapters are numbered by course or course type and alternate with intermezzos—menus, table settings, recipes, and a short visual essay on the Danish flag—that bring context and depth to her subject.

Carol Gold makes a convincing case for the role of cookbooks as evidence of and participants in social, economic, and political changes in Denmark. She weaves the stories cookbooks tell into an engaging book, one that is exhaustively researched and well argued. Gold’s methods and careful analysis offer a model of inquiry that can guide a critical assessment of the social role of any group of older cookbooks.

And what of the venerable rødgrød med fløde that is “as Danish as the Danish flag”? We learn that it originated as a red-wine pudding enhanced by colonial spices and became a berry-based dessert only early in the nineteenth century. The spices continued to evolve but then disappeared as the Danish empire diminished and nationalism arose; by the late nineteenth century the version we enjoy today emerged. In the summer, when I serve this quintessentially Danish dish, I will savor the pure, intense flavors of the cooked berries along with the opportunity to taste Danish history in a bowl.

— Stefanie S. Jandl, Williamstown, MA