The Kitchen on Canvas
Luis Meléndez and the Spanish Still Life

Luis Meléndez: Still-life Painter
Peter Cherry
Madrid: Fundación de Apoyo de la Historia del Arte Hispánico 2004
762 pp. Illustrations. £90 (cloth; available from fineart@derekjohns.co.uk)

Luis Meléndez: Master of the Spanish Still Life
Gretchen A. Hirschauer and Catherine A. Metzger, with Peter Cherry and Natacha Seseña
xiv + 178 pp. Illustrations. $60.00 (cloth)

Over ten years ago, in A Feast for the Eyes, my cookery book for the National Gallery in London, I enthused over Luis Egidio Meléndez’s stunning Still Life with Oranges and Walnuts (1772), describing it as the contents of the store cupboard of his wife, Maria Redondo. Curators and editors were tolerant of my enthusiasm, as toward a bag-lady wandering in from Trafalgar Square munching an illicit snack. A paper I presented at the 1998 Oxford Food Symposium on Maria Redondo’s kitchen secrets explored even more deeply my theme that in many of his still lifes Meléndez was depicting a recipe, a meal, or a gastronomic situation.

But now, at last, the link between the skills and aspirations of Meléndez and the gastronomic themes of his work is being recognized. The gap between the parallel universes of food history and art history is narrowing, and thanks to two recent publications we can now make the necessary imaginative leap between the two. Peter Cherry’s Luis Meléndez: Still-life Painter is a massive catalogue raisonné of the artist’s 135 still lifes, with much background material, including a section in which the paintings are discussed in relation to recipe books of the time (although much fascinating detail is perversely hidden away in footnotes).

A second publication, Luis Meléndez: Master of the Spanish Still Life, is the catalogue of an exhibition that recently circulated in the United States; it illustrates thirty-one of Meléndez’s still lifes. The meticulous catalogue entries in this beautifully designed book have more gastronomic input from Peter Cherry, detailed information about recipes and food, and comments on everyday kitchen objects.

Both these publications delight and stimulate. On one level the still lifes speak for themselves as superb works of art, but the more one ponders their content, the more one is impressed by Meléndez’s grasp of culinary matters, as well as his breathtaking painterly skills.

Meléndez had studied at the Royal Academy of Art in Madrid, confident of a brilliant career painting portraits, heroic scenes from history, classical mythology, and the scriptures. After being expelled from the academy due to his tetchy old father’s quarrels with the committee, Meléndez traveled and worked in Italy, hoping in vain on his return to get commissions from wealthy patrons. He was unlucky, and instead produced a quantity of still life paintings. His clients understood, as he did, the finer points of everyday Spanish eating—not cucina povera but a celebration of the everyday food of Spain, the food of comfortably-off folk who, according to received wisdom, were supposed to be eating fashionable French food, but were instead buying local stuff in markets, and hanging on their walls images of authentic Spanish cooking, the guisados and ollas of taverns and palaces.

This political, patriotic aspect of the work of Meléndez’s work appealed to his royal patrons. Carlos III, in a painting by Luis Paret, sits bolt upright and miserable, a lonely widower, as the formal rituals of serving the solitary monarch unfold in surroundings of magnificent luxury. The walls heave with over-life-sized panels of nymphs, gods, and mortals performing heroic deeds, the sort of things Meléndez was trained to produce but never did. But both Meléndez and Carlos had once enjoyed the douceur de vivre of Naples. Carlos was that rare European monarch, a “live-in” ruler who loved his realm, the Two Kingdoms of Sicily and Naples, and reigned there with enlightened benevolence until he reluctantly became King of Spain on the death of his brother. Carlos missed the charms of...
These zany diagonals and intersecting and overlapping curves of his “wayward perspectives,” as Peter Cherry calls them, create tensions that rivet our attention. What at first seems a jumble of stuff on the kitchen table, tipped out of Maria Redondo’s shopping bag, is in fact a rigorous, perfectionist arrangement of items illustrating a precise theme. This apparently casual pile-up of ingredients had its logic; the meal or recipe or gastronomic event had its own agenda; the component parts their own visual discipline. The low viewpoint and intimate eyeball-to-eyeball impact of the still lifes seem to suggest that Meléndez painted them sitting down at a cluttered kitchen table, and perhaps the pots and pans were from a homely domestic environment rather than a cupboard of studio props. For the kitchen is at the heart of his work—the dark, aromatic, chaotic space of a
Hayward drew my attention to this and many other details, like the way tomatoes, popular in rustic dishes, began turning up in recipe books as a fruity addition to many dishes, such as a summer salad, or chopped and pounded to make a gazpacho; or how the dimensions of the bowls or plates in the painting could indicate which of these dishes Meléndez had in mind. Hayward reminded me of the custom of putting a little jug or bowl of water over the mouth of a puchero to keep the contents moist as steam condensed on its underside and dripped back into the stew.

We can deduce how oil in a conical tin would be used to fry bream in a long-handled skillet, to be served with a sauce of garlic and peppercorns pounded in the brass mortar with olive oil and a squeeze of bitter orange juice, and figure out that when a ceramic jar of vinegar is added to the composition the end result will instead be an escabeche of pickled fried fish, as seen in Still Life with Bream, Oranges, Garlic, Condiments, and Kitchen Utensils in the Masaveu Collection, Madrid.

Meléndez had the acumen to exploit the appeal of this patriotic food, and now that more and more of his still lifes come to light we might wonder if, far from being a failure, he had an appreciative public and earned an honest living from the kind of work he excelled at and enjoyed doing. Lovers of Spanish art and cookery can find out more, and derive enormous pleasure, from both the exhibition and these two publications, where the fruitful convergence between gastronomic and art studies shows how much still needs to be done in this fascinating area of food history.