The Flavour Thesaurus: Pairings, Recipes and Ideas for the Creative Cook
Niki Segnit
London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2010
400 pp. £18.99 (cloth)
[Published in the United States by Bloomsbury as The Flavor Thesaurus: A Compendium of Pairings, Recipes and Ideas for the Creative Cook, $27.00]

The Flavour Thesaurus is the anarchist among the food books published in 2010. When we say that taste is “subjective,” it is different from listening to music subjectively. What happens on the tongue is far easier for science to describe objectively.

Until the new wave of flavor-combining chefs came along, who experiment with unusual combinations as a matter of principle, no one could have published a book like this for those who consider the combinations on their plate more important than seasonality and provenance. The book seems to have been published with low expectations (no illustrations, small hardback format), or perhaps its understatedness seemed right for a reading audience greedy with slick television illustrations. Yet The Flavour Thesaurus became a bestseller in Britain by disputing Fannie Farmer’s idea of putting parsley on eggs. Niki Segnit writes, “To my mind, cooked egg white has the mineral edge of Perrier in cans, and so caution should be exercised when combining it with parsley—especially an egg white omelette—unless you get your kicks from licking rocks” (p.192).

The American edition needed to rearrange some descriptions—the references to black pudding would not be digestible. And the chapter on “Green and Grassy” offers dozens of combinations that Asian palates would not enjoy. However, this is a book for everyone’s education; it can be used equally by Japanese businessmen in European restaurants or by diners encountering Mario Batali’s pairing of goat cheese and anise for the first time. Segnit’s thesis is that very incompatible tastes are universal.

Thanks to the book’s success, the London Times immediately commissioned Segnit to write a weekly column, in which she explains why some pairings, like papaya and lime, work anywhere. (That particular column further advocated leaving a few of the papaya’s black seeds in the salad for their watercress flavor; in London’s current “use everything” environmental mentality, papaya seeds are now at the forefront.)

Until this book appeared, no one had properly explored the idea of compatible foods. If you hear the jibe that Segnit wants a “unifying flavor theory”—which is to food pairings what Casaubon’s delusional book is to mythologies in Middlemarch—I will defend her. As the title states, the book is a compendium, nothing as overarching as a theory. The general reader has not had this conversation with anyone possessing Segnit’s taste sensibilities, and many of the possibilities she discusses have never before been so plainly aired (such as the Italian anathema of pairing white fish and hard cheese).

Some of Segnit’s judgments will be debated. But, as my daughter proved in a three-course dinner party based entirely on flavor combinations in the Mint chapter, even that commonplace herb is more interesting in its variety than most of us realize. We may all imagine having the aplomb to write this book, but it is unlikely we could rise to the level of Segnit’s discussion of Mornay sauce and McDonald’s Filet-O-Fish. How does one properly review a volume like this, in which the author has done not everything “in our dreams” but created a book that opens discussion where we remain tentative?

—Michele Field, London

The Italian Way: Food and Social Life
Douglas Harper and Patrizia Faccioli
311 pp. Illustrations. $29.00 (cloth)

This volume is an uneven collaboration between two sociologists, Douglas Harper (“outsider”) filling the role of spokesperson and Patrizia Faccioli (“insider”), local mediator, social secretary, and co-researcher, who overcame her early skepticism and affirms that this volume is as much for Italians as Americans, because it asks questions Italians cannot answer and mightn’t have thought to ask. It is polite for her to say as much, but this reader cannot concur.

The volume suffers from a fundamental identity crisis and confusing structure. Does it want to be an academic or popular volume? Opposing thrusts produce some dissonance, e.g., a sudden shift to “scientific” charts and equations—findings easily conveyed in simple prose. Methodological problems arise: the sample used necessarily skews the conclusions on traditionality versus eclecticism. Since their study includes only one working-class family (e.g., more traditionalist than the cosmopolitan and experimental middle and elite classes), the contents of the volume might have better been reflected in a title such as: “Food tales from Bologna’s urban middle-class and elite.”

The volume also betrays a certain editorial carelessness. Translations are mostly, though not always, well-rendered.