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 greasy 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.

The chapter on “Green and Grassy” includes only one working-class family (e.g., frogs, social secretary, and co-researcher, who overcame her early skepticism and affirms that this volume is as much for urban middle-class and elite classes), the contents of the volume might have better been reflected in a title such as: “Food tales from Bologna’s elite classes,” since their study 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.

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.”
Some are problematic or downright incorrect. There are some factual errors: pizza was not invented in Naples in the 1880s (p.159), only the commemorative (red, white, and green) “pizza Margherita” was, to honor the queen of Savoy and the recent Unification of Italy. The volume needs a more complete table of contents (actually specifying titles for subsections). And for all the talk of visual sociology and “photography of the ordinary,” the photographs are not all that eloquent. Some could have been eliminated altogether: the unfortified photo of Pino captured with his eyes closed; and why does H. himself appear in apparently gratuitous self-portraits (pp.145, 286)? The historical photos “to remind us what hunger looked like in war-ravaged Italy” (p.24), however, are especially well-chosen and quite moving.

Turning to the positive side of the ledger, there is a sensitivity toward the spoken word. Multiple conversational voices expressing cross-sectional attitudes toward food, sharing recipes, questioning/answering, at times sound like a noisy and vibrant kitchen. The authors correctly identify the fundamental meal “template” that defines all regions of Italy—presumably as old as ancient Rome: antipasti or appetizer (=Lat. gestum), il primo or a soup/pasta (=mensa prima), secondo or meat/fish entrée (=mensa secunda), dolce or dessert (=dulcis in fundo) (p.201). The cover photographs might have visually reflected this canonic meal architecture rather than picturing an antipasto, primo, salad, coffee.

Despite its confusing subsegmentation, the volume is essentially bipartite, presenting: 1) historical contexts of food, dichotomies of regional and national identities, scarcity and plenty, sacred and profane; and 2) how Italians prepare their food in both material and cultural ways (organization and improvisation, degrees of commitment to regional working cuisine to their daughters (p.111). Interesting too is how, for the region of Emilia Romagna, making all-important sfoglia (for fresh-made pasta) seems to form a litmus test of a woman’s worth in the kitchen.

A list of “take-home” points that Harper-as-outsider really got right caught my eye: “Italians are extraordinarily addicted to their televisions…Italians talk over it anyway” (p.82)! “Italians party a lot…but I’ve never seen an Italian drunk at one of these events” (p.87); “Kitchens are spotless; dishes are washed and put away” right after a meal (p.145). Italians believe that you should never drink cappuccino in the afternoon, because the human system cannot digest frothy milk after 10:00 A.M. (p.228). “Ragù is never—repeat, never—served with Neapolitan spaghetti!” (p.173). Other tidbits are scattered along the way: the complexity of food for the “lesbigay” segment of Bolognese society (p.158), especially since gender roles are so rigid (p.120).

Two of the three concluding assertions merit attention: Italians have a cultural “self-confidence,” which they generously share with others (“I do not know of another culture where I could have done this study, and I know several where I could not” p.285); and, Italians’ use of food is good for social life, for bodies, and for the planet. They show balance and restraint in food consumption, practice manageable sized food production (e.g., 30-cow farms in Emilia...
Romagna, co-op dairies, and local production, which highlight intelligence and humanity). This approach makes for good work, a living wage, professional pride, and produces “exquisite food in the process” (p.286). Harper might have resisted, however, a grandiose salute to Isabella Dalla Ragione’s text, supplemented with essays by Emilio Tremolada, is born of the love of the botanical species of Italy’s Upper Tiber Valley in the modern region of Umbria. The volume is part of a larger project to re-create in San Lorenzo di Nerchi an orchard of the lost or forgotten arboreal species of the area around Città di Castello. Tenendo innanzi frutta is thus a study of fruit and vegetable cultivation rather than of gastronomic or art history. The period in question is the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the evidence consists of documents from the archive of the Bufalini family in San Giustino and contemporary botanical frescoes in Umbria.

The documents, which had already been published in 2001 by Enrico Mercati and Laura Giangamboni, give an account of the agricultural activities on the estates of the Bufalini and Vitelli families. They are a primary source for the history of agriculture; one of the registers, called “Harvests of Several Estates,” dates back to 1479 and is among the oldest of its kind in Italy. Other volumes attest to the introduction of early forms of tenant farming, the working conditions of laborers, and the equipment used to work the land. But Dalla Ragione’s primary interest is the cataloguing of the produce grown for family consumption and sale.

“Occasionally,” the author confesses, “to rest my mind and eyes during the study of the documents, I looked up at the wonderful frescoes that decorate the noble rooms of the Bufalini Castle” (p.47). What she saw, and what the book lavishly illustrates, are the works of Cristofano Gherardi, an artist from Sansepolcro who moved in the circles of Giorgio Vasari, the painter and unrivalled biographer. Vasari’s sympathetic Life of Gherardi confirms Dalla Ragione’s hypothesis that the festoons of vegetables and fruits the artist painted in 1546–1554 were accurate imitations of what was growing at the time in the castle’s orchards and gardens. While the visual evidence supports Vasari’s premise that Gherardi was indeed beholding natural fruits to portray lively pictures of them, the empiricism of the artist’s approach was by no means unique, for the same fruits and vegetables are seen in Prospero Fontana’s frescoes in the nearby Palazzo Vitelli, while the underlying pictorial conventions originated in Rome at the beginning of the century.

The festoons surrounding Raphael’s mythological frescoes in the entrance loggia of the Villa Chigi (now Farnesina) in Rome set the tone. Begun in 1518 by Giovanni da Udine, many of the fruits and vegetables depicted in these frescoes clearly had sexual overtones. In his Life of this artist Vasari described “a Priapus fashioned from a gourd and two eggplants for testicles…while nearby a cluster of large figs, one of which overripe and bursting open, is penetrated by the gourd.” Erotic puns were common in Renaissance poetry and art, with the fig and the peach being especially popular symbols of human sexuality. Dalla Ragione generally steers clear of such allusions, however, although her discussion of peaches does read them as “feminine, almost sensual” (p.108). Florio’s 1598 Italian-English dictionary confirms the meaning of pesca as “a young man’s bum.”

The author’s agricultural interests are occasionally complemented by references to historical publications like Costanzo Felice’s famous 1565 treatise on salad, or Vincenzo Tanara’s 1644 investigation of Italian farming practices, but dietary issues of the kind raised by Giacomo Castelvetro’s The Fruit, Herbs, and Vegetables of Italy, composed in 1614 (English translation, 1989), are not addressed. Mixing gastronomy with the prevailing belief in humoral theory, Castelvetro’s text recounts that melons, for example, are “marvelously refreshing to the system…and are excellent for those troubled with kidney stones and will cure burning urine between midday and starlight.” For recipes based on the same fruits and vegetables, one may also wish to turn to Terrence Scully’s new and well-indexed translation of Bartolomeo Scappi’s Opera, originally published in 1570.

—John Varriano, Mt. Holyoke College