

BOOK REVIEWS

Jane Steward: *Medlars – Growing & Cooking*. Prospect Books, April 2023: 200 pp., paperback, £10.00.

An intriguing fruit that most people know but do nothing about. Jane Steward is the founder of the only medlar-focussed business in Great Britain, Eastgate Larder Ltd, possessing an orchard of 115 trees in Norfolk, which is also the Plant Heritage National Collection. So she should know it all. This is a most excellent, clearly written, instructive, helpful and interesting volume. Sometimes an encyclopaedia article is all you desire, or a good dictionary definition, but a small monograph that covers all the points, and has a few anecdotes, instructions, recipes and pictures to boot, is often so comforting to have as a back-up, or as a springboard to further thoughts. This really does the business. I only regret that our own efforts to grow a medlar in our orchard were blighted.

Marc Meltonville: *The Tavern Cook: Eighteenth Century Dining through the Recipes of Richard Briggs*. Prospect Books, March 2023: 256 pp., paperback, £15.00.

Marc Meltonville has long been a name to conjure with after many years working at the Royal Palaces, in particular Hampton Court, and his creative role in re-enactment in the kitchen. It is brilliant that he has been persuaded to produce this entertaining and informative book about one of the early London tavern cooks, Richard Briggs. As all of us who have been musing about the early history of restaurants will well know, it all started (in fact, if not in theory) in London with the taverns and chop houses. Just read Boswell's London journal. No need for that fancy French theorizing. Richard Briggs wrote *The English Art of Cookery* in 1788. He was cook at the White Hart, Holborn, the Temple Coffee House and 'other taverns in London'. Meltonville has topped and tailed a long central section which reprints many of the recipes in this book alongside a running commentary. The method brings perspective, on the one hand, and enlivens what might otherwise be a straight facsimile reprint – which is not necessarily to everyone's taste nowadays (and is probably available anyway on the Internet). As a semi-independent commentator, I should also congratulate Prospect Books on a generous and sensible pricing policy.

Bryce Evans: *Feeding the People in Wartime Britain*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2022: 194 pp., hardback, £85.00.

This is part of a series, Food in Modern History, edited by Peter Scholliers and Amy Bentley. Bryce Evans, who has already contributed the volume *Food*

and Aviation in the Twentieth Century: The Pan-American Ideal, is a professor at Liverpool Hope University. Rather than being a rehash of the narrative of rationing, food controls and efforts to improve agricultural production in wartime that might be implied by its title, this is a focussed study of the workings of the National Kitchen in the First World War and the British Restaurant in the Second. This is most welcome. As one who is just old enough to have been taken to a British Restaurant, for this example survived in Bath until the mid-fifties, I have always had a fondness for the concept – enhanced by the grand reception accorded to Dot, the lady who took me, who had previously been on the staff. Professor Bryce’s account gets down to business, is full of facts and most instructive. A book to be recommended.

Miguel de Baeza: *Los Cuatro libros del arte de la confitería* (1592), intro. by M. García Ruipérez and M. del Prado Olivares Sánchez: Antonio Pareja, Editor, 2014: 161 pp., paperback.

Joaquín Gacén, *Manual de Repostería* (1804–07), ed. by S. Gómez Laguna: Institución Fernando el Católico, Zaragoza, 2000: 112 pp., paperback.

Today’s wide-angled histories of food look closely at Spain, but they do not yet cover every area of culinary creativity. Confectionery, for example, is generally left in the shadows while the spotlight shines on chocolate, seemingly as addictive to study as it is to eat. Perhaps that is why enterprising small Spanish publishers have been turning their hands to reprints of key sixteenth- to nineteenth-century confectionery sources. These may not be hot off the press, but they are worth searching for now while still available, whether new or as used copies, since they reveal a little-known, richly developed, distinctive craft only anecdotally mentioned in fictional and dramatic works.

The most important source, *Los Cuatro Libros del Arte de la Confitería* (1592), was the first Castilian confectionery manual. Written in Toledo by a working confectioner, Miguel de Baeza, of whom nothing is known, its recipes were used until well into the nineteenth century, but only two original copies of the book survive in libraries and neither is digitally available. Lightly modernized and easy to read, this reprint has a brief introduction, but the sixteenth-century text quickly shows how *confiterías* built a commercial niche for themselves by pulling away from apothecaries, who made medicinal sweets, and from aristocratic cooks, who prepared dairy creams and pastries. De Baeza kept to sugar work involving fruits, flowers, almonds, egg whites for clarifying sugar, a few spices like musk and sandalwood, and, in just one of his 83 recipes, egg yolks and flour for spongecakes. No fats, gelatines, milk or chocolate appeared and neither did large-scale sugar sculptures of any kind. Items were small, even tiny, or spoonable. Here were affordable sweets to buy all year round, even in Lent and on the days of each week when meat and fish were off the menu.