

Ken Albala: *The Great Gelatin Revival: Savory Aspics, Jiggly Shots, and Outrageous Desserts*: University of Illinois Press, 2023; 232 pp., paperback, £23.99.

Those of you who have read my reviews may recall that I set a lot of store by those things that many will regard as almost incidental to the actual text: print size and font type can trigger a negative response before I have even read one word; so too, the title, the cover and overall presentation. A bit of a closed mind there, you might be thinking and I would largely agree, especially when presented with something like the book I have in front of me now. Its appearance provokes in me some very confused responses. I'll be honest, this is not a volume that slots in comfortably between those that normally grace my shelves.

It brings to mind a vegetarian lunch I once attended. Then, 'vegetarian' meant 'brown and boring'. Guests had been asked to each bring a dish of food; as they arrived, all were set out on a large table. I had made two items: a lovely fresh green salad whose surface was strewn with bright orange nasturtium flowers; the other, a deeply pink raspberry mousse. To my embarrassment, they shone like a pair of sunlit jewels amongst the bowls of dull and muddy looking lentils, putting one in mind of two brazen hussies who had stumbled by chance into a meeting of sober Quakers. And that's just what Ken Albala's book is doing to my normally restrained bookshelf. Though, just as the Quakers would have with the hussies, it has been made welcome; the books have budged up and let it in – though I think they are a bit put out!

Frankly, the cover induces a slight nausea – whatever is that brown stuff covered with shiny red stripey gloop? The sub-title shouts 'Savory Aspics, Jiggly Shots & Outrageous Desserts' and one is immediately seduced into opening the book and looking inside. We in the UK call it jelly, in the US, jello. They say gelatin, we, gelatine. Most of us growing up have eaten it in its sweet form. Surprisingly, given his obvious enthusiasm, Ken hated his mum's desserts made with the commercial Jell-O and was so repelled on discovering it was made from calves' feet that he refused to ever eat it again! Here, in this culinary investigation full of joyful experimentation, he has clearly overcome his childhood phobia and is now both zealous convert and probably the world expert on the subject of gelatine.

Ken Albala is both a scholar and a scientist. He is meticulous in his research and is always ready to check out his theories experimentally. He is also fun and funny. As a food historian, his subject matter is wide and, as with the story of gelatine, he is able to draw out some of the more obscure strands of his particular discipline. He charts the story of gelatine in both its sweet and savoury guises. The narrative is full of 'who knew?' moments; nuggets to call upon later should talk around the dinner table flag: from jelly houses in eighteenth-century London where ladies of pleasure could be bought along with the sweet dessert, to the burning question of how kosher is jelly, or why

it became the official food of Mormon Utah. He trots us through its historical highlights from the first written record in the 1300s to the present day. All fascinating stuff but you know, by the pace he sets, that he really wants to move us on to the more exhilarating specifics involved in the preparation of dishes using gelatine.

On the way, though not much discussed in the book, one is forced to consider the role that texture plays in one's enjoyment of food. As a generality, we, in the west, tend to be repelled by the feel of certain foods in the mouth. We like soft and crisp and firm and are less keen on slippery, chewy or glutinous. Many are repelled at the thought of oysters, whelks, or tripe, though in themselves they have little flavour; it is the texture that nauseates. I feel gelatinous foods fall into this category (think, jellied eels) and may, at least, partly explain their lack of popularity. Ken Albala bravely raises his guide's flag above his head and asks us to follow him in his reappraisal of all things jellied.

On then to the dishes he prepared in the course of writing the book: looking at the photographs, I think, surely Morticia Addams must be his alter ego. This has to be the sort of food she would have regularly concocted in the family mansion. Page after page of very weird stuff, the preparation of each described in lovingly, loathly detail: of 'Classic Meatloaf', he instructs, 'you have to scrape off the congealed fat when cold.' For his 'Tower of Meat' – 'start the aspic by boiling the feet', and his Jell-O Egg concoction will usefully double as mute for a trombone! I wondered if Ken found his subject during the pandemic lockdown; I imagine him shut away on his own, taking in regular Amazon deliveries of calves' feet, isinglass and powdered deer horn; a mad professor cackling with delight over each jellified concoction. Oh, for another lockdown and time for my own stirring of pots and gleeful squawking as I replicate his Jello Sausage; Bayou Bunny Bordelaise or the Screwdriver Creamsicle. I definitely think we all should keep a copy of this book by us – just in case! This is truly the stuff of madness but makes for a delightful read. Your title throws down the gauntlet! Could there really be a gelatine revival? Taking his own masterly efforts as the point of departure, I think this may be less about a comeback but, rather, a transmogrification into a new and somewhat bizarre art form.

DI MURRELL

Toby Barnard et al.: *Great Irish Households: Inventories from the Long Eighteenth Century*. John Adamson, Cambridge, 2022: 436 pp., hardback, £75.00.

A sumptuous volume from this small Cambridge house that specializes in the fine and decorative arts. It might be thought a companion to the same publisher's 2006 *Noble Households: Eighteenth-Century Inventories of Great English Households*, edited by Tessa Murdoch, who is also the consultant