PPC 120 (2021) 119-120
https://doi.org/10.1558/ppc.27835
Petits Propos Culinaires (print) ISSN 0142-7857
Petits Propos Culinaires (online) ISSN 3029-0651

Mrs Dalgairns touted the fact that none of the recipes in *The Practice of Cookery* is new. Instead, she promoted the book with the claim that she or acquaintances had simplified, improved and tested existing instructions. 'An original book of cookery,' she reasoned, 'would neither meet with, nor deserve, much attention; because what is intended in this matter is not receipts for new dishes but clear instructions how to make those already established in public favour.' One of the reviewers quoted that passage with approval, to concur that her 'reasoning is very just, for none but the most thankless of *gourmands*… would sit down and weep for new worlds of luxury.' Except, of course, that we did and we do. Still, those descriptions of the book are accurate enough, and fair as far as they go. They also render *The Practice of Cookery* less interesting as a cultural marker than original efforts from the likes of Christian Isobel Johnstone or Dr Kitchiner.

Williamson treads firmer ground in admiring the tone of the text. It does, as she contends, disclose a discernible personality. It is brisk and businesslike, uninhibited about dispensing advice, some of it unimpeachably sound: 'Vegetables are always best when newly gathered, and should be brought in from the garden early in the morning; they will then have a fragrant freshness, which they lose by keeping.' On the universally tricky process of producing pastry: 'Puff paste, if good, will rise into blisters in the course of rolling it out; it may be made with three quarters of a pound of butter to one of flour; the flour should be dried, and is the better for being sifted.'

British empiricism informs *The Practice of Cookery*, in a way most helpful to the cook. In an era before the invention of the thermostat, perform a test: 'To ascertain if the oven be of a proper heat, a little bit of paste may be baked in it, before anything else be put in.' And so forth throughout. Mrs Dalgairns gave the less-than-confident cooks she targeted recipes that remained popular for over three decades until, Williamson believes, the onslaught that was Mrs Beeton swept all before her. The attraction of attention to this under-appreciated author is most welcome.

Blake Perkins

Susan Weingarten: *Haroset: A Taste of Jewish History*: Toby Press, 2019: 192 pp., hardback, £18.99.

Haroset traces the origins and development of this symbolic Passover food. *Haroset* is a paste of fruits, nuts and spices, perhaps originating as a Greek dipping sauce to counteract bitter herbs such as lettuce and endives. From Talmudic commentaries and the Graeco-Roman world, to the medieval and early modern Ashkenazi and Sephardi traditions, through to the myriad modern recipes, Susan Weingarten's book is overflowing with detail. As she explores the mysteries and contradictions of *haroset*, Weingarten captures the rich diversity of Jewish life.

A Taste of Jewish History begins by reflecting on the relationship between food and memory, a link that is embedded in Jewish ritual and best exemplified by the Passover *Seder*. This festival involves telling the story of the Exodus of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, while eating and drinking symbolic foods and wine. Weingarten examines why *haroset* came to be included and what it might represent. To Weingarten, *haroset* embodies the dichotomy of Jewish remembrance: it is both a symbol of slavery and of redemption.

What makes the book so compelling is that there is no answer to the underlying question: why do we eat *haroset*? Instead we are given an exquisitely researched profusion of possibilities. Incorporating rabbinical exegesis from across the Jewish diaspora, Weingarten captures the resilience of Jewish communities, establishing traditions and communities wherever they are in the world. As the ingredients to *haroset* shift according to local foods and customs, so too do the justifications used by local rabbis. A thick paste might symbolize the clay of the bricks the Jews made as slaves; a runny sauce the blood of the Ten Plagues. Using apples might gesture to the Song of Songs; while spices could represent the incense of the Temples in Jerusalem.

Ultimately, what matters most is not finding the precise meaning of *haroset*, but telling the stories along the way (fulfilling the commandment at the heart of Passover to tell the story of the Exodus). The final chapter is a series of different recipes for *haroset* from all over the Jewish world. Each is a window into a family and the lack of quantities shows how these recipes have been learnt by cooking together from generation to generation. Collecting them shows the importance of food in evoking memories, both collective and individual. *Haroset: A Taste of Jewish History* is not just a comprehensive record of the food, it is a perceptive insight into Jewish life.

Matilda Mills

Tom Jaine, translator, *The French Country Housewife: The First Volume of* Maison rustique des dames *(1859) by Cora Millet-Robinet*: Prospect Books, 2017: 711 pp., hardback, £35.00.

Maison rustique des dames was once famous in France. First published in 1845 at a moment when the encounter between traditional French agricultural life and modern scientific research was beginning to (let's say) bear fruit, this book was the fruit. If you wanted to improve your country farm and household, it would tell you how, politely, wisely and in satisfying detail. A standby for three generations of readers, it was regularly revised and reprinted during Cora Millet-Robinet's long lifetime and by successive editors after her death until the last, 21st, edition appeared in 1944.

Cora was brought up in Paris and married there, but her husband already owned the château in rural Poitou where they were to live and develop a farm. There she soon became well known, not least for the experiments in silkworm