

*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

farming that she, her husband and her scientist brother conducted together. Her reports on this were eagerly studied. Her popular books on bringing up children and her briefer writings on several aspects of farm management were sensible and scientifically informed. So were the two fat volumes for which she had borrowed the title *Maison Rustique* from a Renaissance farming handbook, conscious, perhaps, that she was riding the wave of a new scientific renaissance. Forty years after their first appearance, when Cora, long widowed, was living in a small property just south of Poitiers, she was rewarded for her life's work with the title of Knight of the Order of Agricultural Merit.

With this national honour to round off the list of her memberships of agricultural societies, Cora had all the recognition that the author of a household and farming manual could reasonably expect. The posthumous editions of *Maison rustique des dames* maintained her fame until the mid-twentieth century. If you owned a farm or ran a country household, and if you read anything at all on the subject, you probably knew Cora's great work and you might well have a copy. But after World War II the world changed and rural France changed with it. The book had had a long run, but during the 1950s much in it was becoming irrelevant. Publishing changed too, and the well-thumbed copies of *Maison rustique des dames* that were still lying around began to look like survivals from prehistory. By the end of the twentieth century, although the social history of rural France was by now a theme for academic study, a topic that attracted general readers, and a publishing genre, Cora Millet-Robinet had been almost totally forgotten. Her work attracted no researchers. Her books were not reprinted. The facts of her biography were hard to discover, and she was not in the encyclopedias. Even people in Availles-en-Châtellerault and Genillé knew nothing of her.

Recently, in a virtual fashion, this has begun to change. As to the biography, Gloria Godard's website *Cora Millet-Robinet, La Dame de la Cataudière* tells the story in detail with illustrations and supporting documents. As to the books, you can read at least a few of the many editions on line, thanks to the Internet Archive and Gallica. The one thing that Cora had always lacked, and still lacked, was celebrity beyond Francophonie: no one had translated her.

Enter Tom Jaïne. Practical cook and food writer, owner of a small château or big house in South Devon, pig man, sheep man, bread oven man, orchardman, he has tried many of the things that Cora tried, though not, I think, the silkworms. A translator needs to share some, at least, of the author's skills. To undertake even the first half of a 1300-page encyclopedic handbook written nearly two centuries ago a translator also requires unusual patience and persistence.

The result is an important new resource for the history of food and farming in the nineteenth century. If you want to know about the scientific revolution in agriculture and what it meant for everyday life in rural France, you have

to have this book. I dare to predict that, having acquired it, you'll admire Cora's all-embracing enthusiasm and the apparent effortless with which she arrived exactly where she wanted to be, whether it happened to have been bedbugs, recalcitrant servants, or a hard-to-persuade husband that stood momentarily in her path. Was she faced with dull tortoiseshell or rosy wine? She knew the cure. Have you perhaps forgotten how to use your bucking tub, your Eeckman oven or your necromancer? Cora will put you right. She's not afraid, occasionally, to state the obvious. 'To make a sparkling lemonade,' she advises, 'pour the lemon syrup that you wish to use into a glass and top it up with fizzy water', but only after explaining how to make really good lemon syrup and how to make your own fizzy water.

Now for a brief outline. The translation itself is preceded by Tom Jaine's thorough 80-page introduction, which includes a biography of Cora, a survey of the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century writings that were largely superseded by *Maison Rustique des Dames*, and an outline of its influence. Part 1 then begins with 'the duties and responsibilities of a mistress of the house', 'how to treat and manage servants', an outline of the metric system (which was not yet as ubiquitous in the French countryside as it now is), 'the arrangement and furnishing of the house', linen, wool, silk, the wardrobe, laundry and ironing. Then 'provisions': baking, keeping wine, household stores of all kinds with much detailed advice on balancing quality and price, and a generous section of recipes for conserving and preserving to complete part 1.

Part 2, beginning on page 388, is the 'kitchen manual'. In other words, it is Cora Miller-Robinet's take on provincial French cookery in the mid-nineteenth century. 'The mistress of the house must know how to cook,' she insists in the brief introductory section, and must also know how to choose and buy supplies, how to arrange a dinner for guests, how to organize 'masters and servants', and how to align all of this 'to the resources at [her] disposal', giving due attention to soups, hors d'oeuvre, butcher's meat, poultry, game both furred and feathered, sea fish and freshwater fish, pasta, sweet dishes, pastry and confectionery, 'dessert and evening receptions' and home made sweets. She can choose from 72 suggested menus, arranged month by month, and from at least 250 recipes (plus those already given for drinks and preserves) seasoned with lots of good advice. And at last, when everyone is satisfied, 'the mistress must choose the proper moment to rise from the table,' keeping in mind that 'meals should not last longer than one hour.' Those who would have wished to prolong the convivial occasion beyond the sixtieth minute are, I'm sorry to say, 'almost always vulgar people whose manners you should in no way imitate.'

Start reading now, and be warned: you will find Cora unputdownable.

ANDREW DALBY