

BOOK REVIEWS

Diego Zancani: *How We Fell in Love with Italian Food*: Bodleian Library, 2019: 248pp, hardback, £25.00.

Don't be put off by the cringe-making title and the somewhat garish cover design, they are there for a purpose. Imagine the appeal of yet another tome from an academic publisher – on the lines of *The Italian impact on the foodways of Great Britain, a survey of developments and influences on our gastronomy from Roman Times to the Early Modern era*, by an eminent Emeritus Professor of Medieval and Modern Languages, University of Oxford, in a neat octavo format with smudgy half-tones and a binding that won't stay open. Hardly the job to get short-listed for a Guild of Food Writers award and go on to become a nation-wide best-seller. Instead we have this vulgar image of a golden forkful of tomato-laden spaghetti, and the provocative use of 'we' in the sprawling red and yellow capital letters of the title (who 'we'? more later) which promises to deliver a thunderingly good read, with a brilliant design at a competitive price. It puts to shame the heavy jargon-ridden works by anxious seekers after tenure spawned by the recognition of food history as an academic discipline, and on the other hand the fussy, expensive quarto format books, of coffee-table food porn, overloaded with itsy-bitsy layout, a superfluity of food photography and banal family reminiscences. The Bodleian Library's designer Laura Parker has served the author well, using a remarkable selection of illustrations, many from the Bodleian Library's resources, and the John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera, seen here for the first time, alongside some better-known images and well-chosen photographs, in a layout with powerful impact, cropped and bleeding off with a direct uncluttered appeal. The elegant typography allows us to follow the author Diego Zancani as he beguiles and entertains us with his genial narrative, a new approach to Italian food. The notes and bibliography show how this is based on his awesome erudition, and the text contains much new research presented with wit and good humour, along with sixteen recipes displayed tongue in cheek on the red and white checked tablecloth of London's trattorias of the '70s. The 'we' of the title is Zancani himself, by now a British citizen, but born in Piacenza in Emilia Romagna, and so in an ideal position to combine childhood memories with first-hand and often hilarious descriptions of our gradual discovery of the delights of Italian food. He remembers the impact of *petto di pollo sorpresa* (molten butter all over his tie) at Mario and Franco's Terrazza, the voluptuous crunch of *carciofi alla giudea* at Bocca di Lupo, the exquisite *cicheti* at Polpo, and the relief at finding authentic ingredients at Lina Stores and Camisa in Soho way back in the '60s, when his Reading landlady knew olive oil only as something you got from the chemist's for earache. But before this personal account of

the impact of Italian food on our generation, Professor Zancani tells of the impressions it made on travellers in Italy in the past, adding new material and lively anecdotes, then going on to describe the arrival of Italians in London and beyond, from Guglielmo Alexis Jarrin and his ice-cream parlour in Bond Street, to the Contini family of Valvona and Crolla in Edinburgh to Ann and Franco Taruschio of the Walnut Tree in Abergavenny. This is a book to read cover to cover, or dip into, as one of the most worthwhile contributions to our enjoyment of Italian food and its history in recent years. The glossary is a strangely perfunctory listing of terms already explained in enjoyable detail in the text and notes, while the picture captions might have been helpfully expanded or put into a sadly missing list of illustrations, while the sixteen recipes which are embedded in the narrative could have been listed somewhere, as a guide to those of us wanting to locate and try out Apicius' melon salad with mint, or Jamie's version of *peposo*. But these are small quibbles, it remains an entertaining read, backed up by serious scholarship.

GILLIAN RILEY

Eugène Briffault: *Paris à table 1846*, translated and edited by J. Weintraub: Oxford University Press, New York, 2018: 212 pp., hardback, £16.99.

Another late review, I fear. Lots of people know this book, a guide to private and public eating in Paris in 1846 written by a high-living journalist, an even better *viveur* than England's own Bon Viveur (Fanny and Johnny Cradock). The original was also illustrated with some wit and panache by the artist Bertall. This is an English translation with an informative introduction and copious notes by the Chicago scholar Joseph Weintraub. It is for these two latter features the book should be purchased as they are excellent. The original text, while sometimes enlightening, is also the worst form of gastronomic literature, full of tiresome, hyperbolic gasbaggery. It reads much better in French – no criticism of the translation – because when this is rendered into English it sounds like a drunken, pompous uncle who should know better. If you can practise reading as a peasant used to winnow his corn, throwing it up in the air to rid it of chaff and letting the grains of fact fall into a retentive brain, then you will derive much profit. Not half so much, however, as from the wide reading and citation of the editor/translator who has profitably gone through myriad volumes of contemporary description, the *littérature panoramique* and the *physiologies* of mid-century France, the bulk of which is too great for most of us to navigate.

Di Murrell: *A Foodie Afloat*: Matador, 2020: 256 pp., paperback, £12.99.

The sub-title is too long for the header, but it reads, 'A cook's journey through France on a barge. A secret world of canals and rivers. An enticing story of slow boats, slow food, small events and chance encounters.' That puts it in