PPC 110 (2018) 110-114
https://doi.org/10.1558/ppc.27995
Petits Propos Culinaires (print) ISSN 0142-7857
Petits Propos Culinaires (online) ISSN 3029-0651

It's payback time. The incomplete index of my Montaigne edition had led me to a different passage of the *Essais* which deserves quoting. I should explain that Downie, a native San Franciscan, now lives in Paris in the heart of the Marais ('the Marsh': pp. 59–61), a stone's throw from the site of the Hôtel Saint-Pol, royal residence established by King Charles V, to whom Taillevent was chef de cuisine. And why was I guided to Montaigne's book I chapter 55, 'On Smells'? Because the chapter ends with these words, which add a nuance to Montaigne's love for the French capital: 'My main concern when finding lodging is to escape heavy and stinking air. Those fair cities, Venice and Paris, are diminished in my estimation by the sharp odours from the mud of the one and the Marsh of the other.' Could this, incidentally, be why the Hôtel Saint-Pol didn't remain a royal residence for very long?

Andrew Dalby

Sara Pennell: *The Birth of the English Kitchen, 1600–1850*: Bloomsbury, 2016: xiv-265pp., hardback, £85.00; paperback, £22.99.

This ground-breaking book takes us away from palace and country-house kitchens, and into the less-studied spaces of the plebeian and middle classes in town and country. Sara Pennell comes at her subject from the perspective of material culture, and she seeks to re-examine the kitchen as a physical space: its position within the house, its functions, its equipment, and its significance to patterns of everyday life, whether physical or spiritual. This book goes much further than earlier studies of material culture as evidenced by inventories, although inventories are a major resource here. Whereas the work of scholars such as Lorna Weatherill examined the social distribution of household goods, Pennell is interested not simply in the 'who' of ownership, but also in the 'where' and the 'how' these goods were used: a new interpretation of these documents is offered here. As well as inventories, Pennell draws on a wide range of sources, including accounts of Old Bailey trials, diaries and letters, planning and building regulations, advice in domestic manuals and cookery books, popular literature, and popular prints. (It is a pity that in this regard the author has not been well-served by her publisher: the black-and-white reproductions of prints are too small and often so uniformly grey as to make it impossible to detect the details which Pennell mentions; furthermore, it is frustrating to find that sometimes, a print discussed on one page does not appear until much later, and so the reader must leaf through the book to find the appropriate image, as for instance the frontispiece discussed p. 23 and reproduced p. 77.) The result is a fascinating, multi-layered account of the development of the kitchen over 250 years.

One of the interesting things that emerges from Pennell's account of the development of the kitchen from its early-modern to its nineteenth-century form is its essential modernity throughout. Time and time again the reader is

struck by resonances with today's ideal or less-than-ideal kitchen. Whether it is the kitchen as a space for multi-tasking, or for bringing together the members of a household and people from outside, or for show and display rather than for real cooking, there are examples here which demonstrate that underlying the important changes to the space, there are also constants. William Verral's remark to about the pleasure of a handsomely-equipped kitchen even if hardly any cooking went on there (26), can be seen at work today in the elegant spaces of many blogs (especially American ones), where the pristine kitchen shows (and the blogger confirms), that no cooking except microwaving ever goes on there. The kitchen can no longer be dismissed as a space used solely for producing meals, of little interest to mainstream historians.

At the start of the book, and in the opening section of her chapter on 'locating the "kitchen"' (37–40), Pennell points to the gaping hole in the historiography of the kitchen: despite modern commentators' emphasis on it as a 'space to think with' (4), nobody seems to have done much thinking about it. Incidentally, quite how one uses the kitchen to think with is something of a riddle, and the expression probably owes much to the writings of French historians and sociologists, with their 'penser la cuisine' or 'penser le repas', a turn of phrase which cannot be reproduced in English. Be that as it may, Pennell shows that the kitchen is a space where changing patterns of abstractions such as consumption, technology, gender relations and domestic competencies can be observed on the ground. And the kitchen was not just a space to cook in. At several points, Pennell shows the desire for the kitchen to function as a convivial, comfortable space, where the utilitarian could combine with pleasing display (56, 83, 88, 104, 105). The notion of the 'modern' kitchen as a recent development ignores the constant process of modernization which has been going on for centuries, whether through architectural developments such as the early-modern adoption of the wall chimney (rather than the central hearth), technological improvements such as the enclosed stove, or the arrival of new consumer goods such as tea and its associated equipment.

This constant process, as well as normal wear and tear, and the neglect of culinary artefacts until recently, is why there are relatively few survivals of earlier kitchen goods, and why the 'heritage kitchen' which is now a feature of the visitor experience in many country houses is almost invariably presented in its Victorian or Edwardian incarnation (the kitchen at Hardwick Hall being a case in point). Pennell's critique of the presentation of heritage kitchens which closes her book is, fortunately, more concerned with a plea for showing the visitor the complexities of the kitchen as lived space than with what Mary Beard's notorious review of Ickworth described as 'fakery', in an ill-informed comment very rightly characterized as 'ridiculous' by Ivan Day. And the example given for one of Pennell's suggestions, that visitors should see the less salubrious aspects of kitchen provisioning (166) is hardly

pertinent: the 'dirty' end of food preparation was never part of the kitchen action at Hampton Court, as raw materials were prepared elsewhere before being delivered ready for cooking. But as Pennell herself is well-aware, there is little chance of re-imagining the presentation of these places to challenge the visitor. The economic pressures are simply too great, and the visitor reactions recorded by Mary Beard can be seen and heard in all 'recreated' kitchens: it is the pleasure of recognizing an item ('my granny had one like that') which gives many visitors a feeling of connection to the experience of country-house visiting (and open-air museum visiting), a connection unavailable in grand state rooms above stairs.

The idealized 'heritage' kitchens, with their array of polished copper pans and moulds, their long scrubbed tables and the general absence of mess and dirt, bear little relation to the everyday realities of the same kitchens in action in the past. But the ideal kitchen is no modern construct: Pennell suggests that the emphasis moved from its being the site of domestic expertise in the seventeenth century to being the perfectly-equipped, efficient space in the nineteenth. Although she says that early domestic texts 'seldom elaborated in words what an ideal kitchen should be, spatially or materially' (18), one can glean some idea of the ideal layout of a house and its domestic offices from early Tudor texts: Andrew Boorde discusses the siting of a house, its internal organization and the need for cleanliness, in chapters 1–4 of his *Compendyous Regyment* (1542), and chapter 5 emphasizes the need for adequate household stuff and implements. But the 'stuff' is never itemized, and the stylized displays in cookbook frontispieces are not particularly enlightening. The two frontispieces selected by Pennell for commentary (22–23) demonstrate this: the roaring fire and the cook tending the spit simply signify 'kitchen', just as the alambic or the churn signify 'still-room' or 'dairy'; these frontispieces are about the completeness of the manual for sale, reinforcing the list of contents on the facing title-page, rather than any ideal kitchen. In accordance with her emphasis on the laborious side of domestic work, Pennell comments that the female servant in the second frontispiece is 'sweating, scrubbing, feeding, eviscerating' – but we see only the cook spitting meat in front of the fire (presumably sweating) and the nursemaid holding a swaddled infant (about to breast-feed?); the scrubbing and eviscerating are nowhere to be seen. As we move forward to the lists of equipment in domestic manuals of the nineteenth century, Pennell rightly notes the 'scientific' and managerial model behind this: the house as efficient factory, with the housewife as vigilant supervisor (33). But this was not wholly new. The knowledge required to ensure effective control (of suppliers, of servants) was already being spread by seventeenth and eighteenth-century cookbooks in the form of marketing guides and advice to servants, both designed to be read by the mistress and the aspirant servant.

In defining what constituted a kitchen and its equipment, Pennell

questions many received ideas. Increasing specialization of service rooms, and the proliferation of equipment, for instance, was not a purely Victorian phenomenon (43–44, 95). The established narrative of the kitchen as segregated from the polite spaces of a home (by being in a separate block, or by being in the basement) for reasons of social segregation is challenged: technological developments such as the arrival of a piped water supply were an important factor driving changing forms of spatial organization. Basement kitchens were popular well before the nineteenth century, and indeed fell from favour by the 1850s; the longevity of urban housing stock explains their remaining prevalence today. At the same time, the kitchen was not necessarily a 'private' (as opposed to 'public' or 'polite') space: kitchens in inns and taverns were public spaces, and kitchens also served as work spaces for small tradesmen. In other areas, the narrative here links up to studies of élite houses. The drive in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century to improve the 'cottage' kitchens of the less affluent was designed to improve the morals of the poor, a down-market version of Mark Girouard's 'moral house' in his 1978 history of the English country house.

Amongst the most interesting sections of the book are the pages devoted to the equipment, 'kitchen stuff', as Pennell explores the changing types of pots and pans in response in response to changes in cooking technology, and to changing food habits (70–81), and looks not simply at who had what, and where it was kept, but also how people acquired their kitchen goods, through buying from various sources, new or secondhand, through gifts from family and friends, by barter (89–94). Consumption, she shows, was not limited to the affluent: the ceramic wares which graced the dining rooms of the well-to-do gave the same air of refinement to the kitchens of the less well-off, as the kitchen dresser took over as storage space from the buttery (104). Other items found in kitchens throw light on neglected aspects of the scene, such as the link between the frequent presence of a timepiece and female numeracy (97–99) and how this is pertinent to the arrival of scales in the kitchen and precise measurements in the cookbooks. Books and prints found in inventories demonstrate the convivial side of the kitchen as living room, but also the kitchen as a focus for domestic piety. Even the pots could be inscribed with uplifting maxims. As Pennell goes on to the negative aspects of belief (such as the fear of witchcraft), things become more speculative: while deposits within the kitchen construction undoubtedly had a spiritual function as warding off evil, the salt-box next to the hearth is less clearly an example of such beliefs. The comments on domestic violence in the kitchen are equally speculative, and Pennell concludes that violence was not a common consequence of kitchen life (148). Poverty was the main source of kitchen evils.

The book reads well, although there are a few caveats to be made. In some instances the examples given do not quite address the point. One of these is

the discussion of basement kitchens: in Pennell's eagerness to show that they were not necessarily cramped spaces, neither of the two specific examples of kitchens larger than the 'polite' rooms of the house was in the basement (52–3). Another is the choice of Susanna Whatman to illustrate the mistress exercising close 'managerial scrutiny' over her kitchen (143); in fact, Susanna Whatman delegated this to her housekeeper, Hester Davis, on the grounds that, since the mistress did not have the time to supervise the servants, 'she must depend upon the Housekeeper to see all her orders enforced and every rule kept up.' A mistaken reference is to Martha Bradley as well as Elizabeth Raffald 'setting up their own eating establishments [and] cookery school businesses' (121–2); Martha Bradley did nothing of the sort, and the secondary source given as a reference does not suggest this at all. I was surprised to find no references to the diaries of James Woodforde or Ralph Josselin, the first valuable for evidence of the constant stream of visitors through his kitchen, the second for the intertwining of domestic culinary, medicinal and religious practice, but given the wealth of primary sources consulted for the book, this is a minor and somewhat churlish cavil. At times the syntax gets away from the author, and we find missing or extra words. 'The cottage kitchen … bore the brunt of wretchedness caused [?by] the effects of high food prices…' (152); 'one did not need to be in kneeling at prayer in church' (135). There are a couple of exotic spellings: 'Victorian womenhood' (130), 'olia podrida' (166). Not all the works cited in the text appear in the bibliography, and the endnotes are annoyingly referenced by chapter only, with no running pagination at the top of the page to guide the reader in chasing up references. All these are passing irritations, but the reader is amply compensated by the densely referenced text, the wealth of sources and the detailed analysis. Pennell has thought about the kitchen to some purpose, and studies of the kitchen, whether as domestic space and its equipment, or for its inhabitants, its practices and rituals, will never be the same again.

Gilly Lehmann

Charles Perry: *Scents and Flavors: A Syrian Cookbook*: New York University Press, 2017: 352 + xvi pp., hardback, £25.00.

This is a very significant contribution to culinary history in general and, in particular, to the understanding of medieval Arabic cuisine, which was far more sophisticated and advanced than western European cuisine in the same era. Arabic cookbooks date back at least as far as the ninth century but, unlike medieval European cookbooks, few are available in modern editions and even fewer have been translated; some of the translations have been judged problematic. Charles Perry's edition and translation of *Scents and Flavors* goes a long way towards redressing this imbalance.

In his introduction, Perry describes the thirteenth century as 'the golden