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BOOK REVIEWS

Claude Fischler, editor: *Selective Eating: The Rise, Meaning and Sense of Personal Dietary Requirements: An interdisciplinary perspective,* translated from the French by Cynthia Schoch and William Snow: Odile Jacob, 2015: 264 pp., paperback, €25.90.

Medieval codes of manners began at what we would consider today a fairly unsophisticated level: don't spit in the wine, don't blow your nose on the tablecloth. As they evolved, new precepts were less concerned with avoiding actions that might provoke disgust and more focused on courtesy, civility and commensality, emphasizing the role of the table as a locus of socialization. And so it remained, for many centuries.

In *Selective Eating: The Rise, Meaning and Sense of Personal Dietary Requirements: An interdisciplinary perspective*, French sociologist Claude Fischler and a range of authors from many other disciplines examine Personal Dietary Requirements (PDRs) from a variety of angles and discuss their consequences for commensality. Fischler's opinion is unequivocal: PDRs 'always imply facing "exclusion" or withdrawal, whether voluntary or not, from the circle of guests and the meal to be shared ...The individual must always make demands or make compromises' (p. 18). From a sociocultural perspective, he questions whether the trend towards 'individualization and other things tailor-made' (p. 32) will diminish commensality and its role in inculcating 'the rules of sharing, responsibility and solidarity' (p. 20), and whether new, viable forms of commensality will be invented 'that are flexible enough while also being sufficiently ritualized to impart meaning to the experience of a shared meal' (p. 34).

While paying attention to genuine, bona fide allergies and intolerances (such as to lactose), the book's main focus is on self-chosen regimes, whether a selective diet for ethical, political or health reasons or a restrictive weight-loss diet. Both might have the same consequence in terms of commensality, but the justifications are vastly different and, for the latter, sometimes quite lacking in substance – for example, the paleo diet, described as 'more inspired by the myth of the noble savage than by the realities revealed by science' (p. 104). Indeed, some self-imposed diets are now classified as eating disorders, such as orthorexia (characterized by control, rigidity and rigour) and extreme food neophobia.

Individual reasons for adopting a selective regime are many and varied, but with each the ability to control one's diet represents a kind of security. Not having to think about what one eats removes a source of possible anxiety, such that a diet can become 'a reassuring way of life' (p. 143). And reassurance can be seductive. In USA, where selective diets are better tolerated than in France,

a long succession of food scares – from pesticides and chemical additives to animal fat and cholesterol – has left individuals being 'forced to navigate alone through the stormy sea of food fears' (p. 229), and if their compass is nutritional rationale rather than tradition and custom, the result is more likely to be individualized diets.

Since most diets, even a self-selected pre-summer diet, are exclusionary, the prospects for the continuance of traditional commensality are not rosy. Estelle Masson suggests that digital sharing – Instagram and the like – could replace physical sharing, though I fail to understand the equivalence. Her other suggestion is far more attractive, though I fear it verges on the utopic: that by establishing new criteria for selection of foods, namely freshness, quality and seasonality, and by revaluing meal preparation, individuals could regain control of their food and maintain the sociability of eating together.

As is usually the fate of any edited collection of conference papers, *Selective Eating* is somewhat uneven in quality, but the book provides great service in offering such a comprehensive overview of a contemporary phenomenon.

Barbara Santich

Mary-Anne Boermans: *Deja Food. Second helpings of classic British dishes*: Square Peg, 2017: 352 pp., hardback, £20.00.

Readers of *PPC* will be familiar with Mrs Boermans's enthralling forensic analyses of British dishes, and need only refer to earlier pages in this issue for yet another instalment. They may also be aware of her arrival on the scene via *The Great British Bake Off* and her previous book *Great British Bakes*. What we have in this new title is a wide selection of historic recipes re-worked and re-presented for the modern cook. Each dish sports a short introduction, sometimes concentrating on the source, others on the author's own views of the matter in hand. There are a few twentieth-century recipes but in the main the sources date from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, although the odd medieval one does appear. The publisher, and the author too, will have been aware of a delicate balance to be struck between the needs of the cook on the Clapham omnibus and interests of people like us, readers of *PPC*. My comments relate to this latter group. The connection between recipe and source is not always as clear as it could be, and the list of sources stops short of mentioning whether the original book is still available to the modern reader as a facsimile or online version (a selfish point, I know, as several are Prospect Books titles, but it might be helpful for the tyro historical cook). The recipes are not printed in their original form but only as Ms Boermans's versions. There's no doubt that it is encouraging to see that a practising cook has managed a workable and attractive product (often usefully photographed too) but it might also be quite helpful to see from what she developed her interpretation. The nub of the matter, however, is that here are gathered a few score of really good