PPC 119 (2021) 125-126
https://doi.org/10.1558/ppc.28057
Petits Propos Culinaires (print) ISSN 0142-7857
Petits Propos Culinaires (online) ISSN 3029-0651

BOOK REVIEWS

Sam Bilton: *First Catch Your Gingerbread*: Prospect Books, 2020: 256 pp., paperback, £15.00.

I really enjoyed this book. There are separate indexes for the history and the recipes, and I appreciated the two distinct sections – I could sit and enjoy the reading of the general history, and then relish choosing recipes to try out, with additional specific history with individual recipes.

For me, gingerbread has always been the stuff of magic: it comes with tales of caravans of spices from the East, the Orient, travelling along the Silk Road, and so with the air of being an aromatic luxury. It's part of nursery rhymes and fairy stories, fairs, Christmas, parties and celebrations. It was considered good luck to eat a piece of gingerbread bought at a fair – a fairing. Plus what can be more magic than a gingerbread house? I knew too that gingerbread was often gilded – so it had the added allure of gold. Now I know so much more about gingerbread in all its forms and traditions world-wide, and how people have used it in all sorts of ways, both sweet and savoury. I made gingerbread hearts in several sizes for both my children's weddings, without knowing that I was following what others had done long ago.

I found the historical accounts fascinating – full of detailed research, and written in an attractive style, including an obvious sense of humour. I even found the notes compelling to read: I have never so avidly read notes before. I learned that gingerbread was sometimes sold in pharmacies as a medicine, considered to alleviate digestive problems and to have a calming effect, and it has long been part of alternative medicine. I learned about Zarafa, a giraffe who travelled almost five thousand kilometres from Africa to France over many months – a gift given in 1827 from the Viceroy of Egypt to King Charles X of France – who took Paris by storm when she arrived and who became immortalized in gingerbread. I have a giraffe ginger biscuit cutter, but find the long thin neck always snaps. I loved the idea of making hornbooks (an early form of children's primers) out of gingerbread so that if letters were memorized correctly, the book itself could then be eaten.

The recipes were an adventure, with ingredients such as grains of paradise conjuring up a fascinating, exotic world. Some were familiar; some were a refreshing new twist on something similar and many were entirely unknown. In the savoury recipes, the combination of potted mackerel, rhubarb chutney and parkin is a definite new favourite, as is the tip to keep offcuts of gingerbread as crumbs to add to breadcrumb coatings. Meatballs with Tomato and Ginger Sauce, and Proud Henry (sausages in beer sauce, which includes crumbled gingerbread) are now regularly served in my house. Gingered Scotch Rabbit is a revelation. For a dessert, look no further than the gingery Stuffed Poached Pears, but don't forget Lady Windermere's Gooseberry Tart and the Steamed Gingerbread Puddings with Whisky Mac Sauce. For something really rich, try Panpepato - a 'heavily spiced cake, stiff with nuts and candied fruit' with the addition of chocolate and a good dose of black pepper. The suggestion is to

cut into 64 pieces – a guide to its richness. You can bake gingerbread with a variety of sympathetic companions – coconut; honey; maple syrup; marzipan; plum jam or even parsnips! There are firm gingerbread cakes as well as spongy ones, and they keep well. The Parkin Pigs are fun and the Chocolate Orange Gingerbread cookies are delicious – plus I learned that cookie isn't, as I'd presumed, an American word, but from the Dutch 'koekje' meaning 'little cake'.

In conclusion, I spent a very pleasant time with this book. I learned, and enjoyed, a lot. The illustrations are plentiful and the bibliography extensive. Sam Bilton says, 'I hope you will go forth and explore the recipes so that your home can be filled with the comforting waft of sugar and spice.' I did, and it was.

Polly Morrow

Pen Vogler: *Scoff: A History of Food and Class in Britain*: Atlantic Books, 2020: 480 pp., hardback, £20.00.

When I lived and worked in London, it was always good fun to see the locals not know where to place this American on the social ladder. While we definitely have social class structures in the U.S. I never really considered what I called an evening meal, if I ate brown or white bread, or if I hosted a dinner party as a way to tell someone that I was from a middle-class family in Illinois. If I had been able to read *Scoff* before I moved there, it would have helped me to understand a number of oddities, like nut loaf, or my colleagues love of pea and ham soup as well as the entire business of tea.

Vogler's book, *Scoff*, is an in-depth romp through all things food-related, from turkeys and tea through to small plates and almond milk and at times, it reads more like an encyclopedia, compendium or a dictionary, yet, it is grounded in historical research with globules of observation and a few crumbs of personal details thrown in. *Scoff* does several things well. It's thorough and, thankfully, not written by an academic. Vogler's writing feels swift and stripped back and, given the number of topics it covers there is little room for flourish. It is so well researched. She not only uses historical facts as a reference but includes literary ones as well like Charles Dickens and Jane Austen.

There are a couple of issues. First, there is just so much! Some chapters have been reduced to only a few pages and it makes me think that there are entire sections that could be cut altogether. In a book like this, each chapter should push forward the general thesis and support the notion that English food and social class is complex and that it fluctuates. Could we not do without a chapter on Parmentier Potatoes or jelly, then? While the book is definitely a unique and important contribution, I couldn't help but find it all rather dull to read. Good writing isn't necessarily engaging writing, and Vogler is a keen wordsmith, but as someone who has read a number of books about food, society, class and status, few of them stand out as one I want to revisit. *Scoff* is perhaps best utilized as a dinner party guide for when you argue about the origin of the dinner party.

I was reminded of the anthropologist Kate Fox's book *Watching the English*. A good portion of that book covers English food and social structures, class, and