

## BOOK REVIEWS

Emily Selove, trans. and ed.: *Selections from The Art of Party-Crashing by al-Khatib al-Baghdadi in Medieval Iraq*: Syracuse University Press, 2012: 176pp. hardback, \$24.95.

This review is a little late. England is fortunate in welcoming the translator Emily Selove to the staff of Exeter University and witness to this is her first work, a translation of a book of anecdotes called *Kitāb al-tatfil* by the eleventh-century Iraqi scholar *al-Khātīb al-Baghdādī*. All the stories revolve around hospitality, some around girls, some around food, and all depend on the art of party-crashing: the party-crasher being somewhat the same as ancient Greek and Roman parasites. What they got up to, amusing episodes in the life of the table, reflections of manners, cookery and sociability: all are contained here in this nice example of Arab *belles lettres*. And the translation reads well, allowing a cheerful cast to the face of the reader, which sometimes erupts into a veritable giggle. The history of food is never restricted to the cooking pot: the context and wider impact of the act of eating give rise to lots of fun and games.

Dan Barber: *The Third Plate: Field Notes on the Future of Food*: Abacus, 2016: 486 pp., paperback, £10.99.

This was first published by Penguin in America in 2014. The style is American non-fiction writing, familiar to us through the *New Yorker*, the *New York Review of Books*, the *London Review of Books* and, now, the 'Long Read' in the *Guardian* introduced by its new Amerophile editor. Extensive, anecdotal, didactic, with lots of direct speech (the memory, the memory), sometimes too much of all these qualities, but none the less easily readable and often informative. Dan Barber is an American chef. He made his reputation as a 'farm-to-table' operator. From cooking the produce of farmers' markets in downtown New York, he got involved in a living-agriculture experiment outside the city (conveniently funded by a Rockefeller). This started him on a quest for enlightenment as to the proper relationship of the eaten to the grown, hence to the roots of good husbandry. Along the way, he visits 'natural' foie gras production and fish farming in Spain, seed breeders in north-western USA, crazy crop rotators nearer to home on the East Coast, carrot and tomato growers and the whole business of heirloom varieties, and enthusiasts for getting the right sort of soil. There is plenty to engage with and his subjects' preoccupations are vital and rewarding. I made constant notes of things to try. His quest is not just for knowledge but for a way to translate that knowledge into a different culinary repertoire – one more closely attuned to the realities of farming (the 'third plate' indeed). Perhaps the proof of his success can only be tasted: reading the results was not so mouth-watering. But this might be strongly recommended as improving and diverting holiday reading.