

Joan Morgan: *The Book of Pears. The Definitive History and Guide to over 500 Varieties*: paintings by Elisabeth Dowle: Ebury Press, 2015: 304 pp., hardback, £45.

Joan Morgan has written a wonderful book. Following her comprehensive *Book of Apples*, she has turned her attention to pears, their origin and history, likely provenance, the stories of the men who bred them, their role in the fortunes of their growers, canners and exporters. Among the ‘pear pioneers’ she tells the story of Van Mons endlessly sowing Pippins to select new varieties and frequently having to move his orchards as world events intervened; how kings and popes advanced the varieties through their gardeners; and how in the 1930s British growers began to fight back against the tremendous importation of pears from America.

She explains the changes in their growing habits with the development of different rootstock, grafting and budding, and how labour shortages have led to the completely different look of the modern pear orchard. There is nostalgia for the ancient standard-tree orchards and the pear trees of great age and nobility as well as acknowledgement of the great value of Brogdale (home of the National Fruit Collection), the East Malling Research Station and the RHS, which continue to be the important resources for pomologists.

In our over-sugared age when fruits are available all year, it is important to remember how historically the little orchards around mixed farms, in cottage gardens and market gardens were prized. Before controlled-atmosphere storage, different varieties were grown to extend the season as long as possible and the hard pears that never softened, baking pears, or the Perry pears that ‘made a drink to rival the best wines’ were of immense domestic importance. Pears were dried and pickled, served with meats as well as eaten as dessert fruit. The rise of canning made the California ‘Bartlett’ pear an affordable luxury.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, ‘There are only ten minutes in the life of a pear when it is perfect to eat.’ Joan Morgan rightly says that knowledge of how to deal with pears has dwindled, most of the pears we eat are probably outside this perfect window, but she describes the felicity of perfection lovingly. Take, for instance, her descriptions of Doyenne du Comice, as ‘rich, luscious, very buttery exquisitely textured, juicy pale cream flesh; sugary sweet with intense lemony undertones, developing hints of vanilla and almonds’ – this is from the internationally comprehensive list of pear varieties towards the back of the text, in itself a *tour de force*.

Elisabeth Dowle’s illustrations are excellent, each one showing the pear blossom, the leaves, how the pear hangs on the tree, the ripened fruit and the fruit cut to show pips and core, all vital for identification. The pears illustrated are mostly unusual varieties. There are many other illustrations, some from ancient sources, which all add to the charm of this book.

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