

BOOK REVIEWS

Fabio Parasecoli & Peter Scholliers, general editors: *A Cultural History of Food*: Berg, 2012, 6 vols., hardback, £350.

The publishers aim to cover the ‘physical, spiritual, social and cultural dimensions’ of food in these six volumes. Each one has ten identical thematic chapters:

1. *Food Production*
2. *Food Systems*
3. *Food Security, Safety and Crises*
4. *Food and Politics*
5. *Eating Out*
6. *Professional Cooking, Kitchens and Service Work*
7. *Family and Domesticity*
8. *Body and Soul*
9. *Food Representations*
10. *World Developments*

Berg explain that, ‘This structure means readers can either have a broad overview of a period by reading a volume or follow a theme through history by reading the relevant chapter in each volume.’ They are of the opinion that, ‘Superbly illustrated, the full six volume set combines to present the most authoritative and comprehensive survey available on food through history.’ ‘Superbly illustrated’ is just plain wrong. Sporadic and sparse would be the adjectives I would have chosen. In the CD-Rom version I have been given for review (the CD-Rom is annoyingly embossed FOR REVIEW ONLY on each page – even the blank ones), some volumes have no pictures at all and in all they are few and far between. The publishers inform us that there are 52 black and white illustrations (no coloured ones) over all six volumes. Chapters which cry out for illustrations, such as Food Representations are almost or totally devoid of them. Thank goodness that those that are present are relevant and useful. The uniform structure of all volumes is good, for the reasons stated by Berg. It also allows this reviewer to follow the themes on which he has most knowledge in trying to assess the quality of the work. I wonder how useful encyclopaedic works like this are: true there are six volumes of text but this covers the world, from prehistory to modern times (800 BC to AD 2000). Inevitably, the history has to be spread thinly and the chapters are introductions to the various topics rather than the last words on the matter. To be worth the money (£350 the set, almost a week’s take-home pay for the average full-time worker in the UK – or more than 6 weeks’ job-seeker’s allowance if you are unemployed) the essays have to cover, to some extent, all the main features of their respective periods, and provide up to date and comprehensive bibliographies and references to more specialized works. And

these are six slim volumes: text, notes and bibliography occupy 268 pages in the largest one, and in total the volumes contain 1456 pages. It may be said that size does not matter, but consider that for £40 tops one can buy all 907 pages of *The Oxford Companion to Food*. A fairer comparison may be the eight-volumed *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, now available for £500. For this you get close on 10,000 pages weighing 14 kg!

MALCOLM THICK

Frances Bissell: *The Floral Baker: Cakes, Pastries and Breads*: Serif Books, 2014: 176 pp., paperback, £10.

[This review, by the author of The Food and Cookery of Malta, addresses specifically Maltese cooks, but her words hold good for cooks of all stripes.]

You are unlikely to find this cookery book on contemporary cookbook shelves where celebrity chefs' books outshine one another with their bright and glossy colours, but Bissell's work shines in its originality and erudition and introduces us to the use of exquisite flowers in our cooking, in the same way as we have become accustomed to using herbs and spices. Here we find how to use lavender, rose petals, saffron, marigolds, fennel flowers, nasturtiums and jasmine in cakes, breads, biscuits, puddings and savoury recipes too. It is a book to delight the senses and capture the imagination – a book to read and learn from as well as to cook with. It belongs to the genre before food photography.

Frances Bissell should need no introduction to serious Maltese and Gozitan readers and cooks. She has for a long time had a home in Gozo and was the first British writer to come to appreciate and to take our cuisine seriously, noting the way we have absorbed the influences of our many rulers and invaders, the different cultures and religious movements. For so many years, Maltese restaurant menus offered, almost exclusively, the favourite foods of British soldiers and sailors and came to be denigrated by British journalists in the decades following World War 2. Current generations would find it difficult to believe how limited (with a few notable exceptions) our restaurants used to be and that the wide choices we are offered now barely existed thirty or forty years ago.

Following her earlier work on the same theme (*The Scented Kitchen*) Bissell has with this new book gone further into learning herself and teaching us how to use fresh flowers in our baking and we are offered recipes for quick and slow breads, with and without yeast, fruit cakes, sponge cakes, biscuits, meringues *macarons* and *éclairs*, celebration cakes to delight us, most with the addition of the subtle flavour of fragrant flowers. Since we now know only too well the dangers to our health from eating too much sugar we find also several recipes for savoury biscuits, pastries and tarts. We are offered innovative versions of well known sweets – such as cassata, mille-feuilles, Madeira and sponge cakes,