

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,

almond cakes and many more. Here you will find such delicious-sounding recipes for orange flower Jaffa cakes, cup cakes with fairy butter, lavender snaps, saffron and rosewater biscuits, rose petal éclairs, floral panforte, chocolate combined with lavender, even a rose Valentine cake for lovers. Amongst the non-sweet recipes there are biscuits made with cheese, saffron and sesame and others with walnut and garlic flowers and a saffron and onion tart.

There are clear instructions too on how to make lavender sugar, how to crystallize flowers and how to dry them for use in cooking. There are also warnings and advice that we should carry out our own research on the edibility of flowers. The author puts it like this ‘do not eat anything that you cannot identify simply because it smells as though it would taste good.’ A great deal of research has gone into this book, its tracing of the history of recipes as well as sources where one can obtain commercially produced flower essences – not surprisingly mostly from Paris and other parts of France.

Many of the flavours Bissell gives in this book are familiar to Maltese cooks – in particular lemon, orange and tangerine rind and orange flower water which are to be found in many traditional recipes. Saffron has featured throughout our history, for it is believed to have been introduced to Malta by the Phoenicians and was greatly loved by the Knights Hospitallers. Probably, because of its high cost, we have not devised many recipes using it except for our famous *ross fil-forn*. In *The Floral Baker* Bissell gives a number of recipes using this treasured flavour in biscuits, breads and tea-breads. Maltese food writers will also greatly welcome Bissell’s inclusion of four of our best-loved sweet recipes.

HELEN CARUANA GALIZIA

Helen Leach: *Kitchens: The New Zealand Kitchen in the 20th Century*. Otago University Press, 2014: 332 pp., paperback, \$NZ49.95.

New Zealanders are indeed fortunate to have Helen Leach as guide, guardian and safe-keeper of their gastronomic past. Although trained as an archaeologist, since 2000 she has devoted her considerable skills and energy to researching and documenting the cooking and eating practices of New Zealanders in the past two centuries. Her research has yielded three earlier books: *The Pavlova Story* (2008); *From Kai to Kiwi Kitchen: New Zealand Culinary Traditions and Cookbooks* (2010); and *The Twelve Cakes of Christmas* (2011). Along the way, she has gathered a vast collection of cookbooks and all kinds of kitchen artefacts, many of which illustrate her most recent publication.

Kitchens is the culmination of this research, an unduly modest title for such a wide-ranging book. It is not only the history of kitchens in the twentieth century, decade by decade, but also a history of meals and cooking, of eating and diet and food supply, and of domestic family life, all informed by the changing social and economic contexts of an eventful hundred years. Leach