

about food issues rather than food, but it's none the worse for that, and is full of most enjoyable illustrations and nicely untoward information. Good stuff.

Florine Boucher: *Tutto Risotto, alles wat je wilt weten, over dat bijzondere Italiaanse rijstgerecht*, Philippe Boucher, 2013: 320 pp., paperback, 29.50 Euros.

Ever since I watched Anna del Conte, at a Guild of Food Writers workshop, demonstrate, with elegant expertise, how to cook risotto, I have had a deep respect for the concept and procedures of this north Italian dish. It is unique in the repertoire of rice cookery. Each stage does things to the rice that contribute to a creamy but chewable ensemble. In *Tutto Risotto* Florine Boucher enhances our understanding of this methodology, and tells of the background, geographical and historical, of the rice culture of northern Italy, especially the Vercellese, where she has lived, and cooked, for over a year. This province, up in the top left hand corner of Italy, between Piedmont and Lombardy, has cultivated rice for centuries. The landscape has been shaped by this, with the abundant tributaries of the Po and other Alpine rivers channelled and controlled to provide essential irrigation to a patchwork area of ricefields, flooded in spring and dry and rustling with the golden grains in autumn, making the most of the horrible damp cold winters and the punishingly hot summers to create an environment just right for the development of the selected strains of rice that are used to cook risottos.

A risotto depends on the variety of rice, the nature of the cooking liquid, (we are given 15 different broths) and the size and shape of the pan you use. The rice varieties listed by Boucher are Arborio, Baldo, Carnaroli, Roma, Sant'Andrea and Vialone Nano. The kinds of risotto you could make with these can be *all'onda*, *all'onda pigra*, or *asciutto*: almost soupy (making waves), just slightly sloppy, and dry. She describes the way different varieties, handled in different ways, can give us a whole range of risottos, with different textures and consistencies, with this in common: the rice has to be *al dente*, to have some bite to it, whether floating in a creamy mass, or sitting high and dry on its plate. What you aim at and how you get there is a matter of both dogma and personal taste, depending on regional usage and local variations. Never mind about being innovative, in a brave youthful urge for self expression, let's get our heads round the old ways first, is Florine's approach, like that of Maureen B. Fant and Oretta Zanini de Vita in their book on pasta, reviewed here recently.

Boucher gives us the basic risotto method, and then six variations on it. First of all the preparation of the *trito*, softening a mixture of finely chopped onion, garlic, leeks, whatever, in oil or an appropriate fat. This aromatizes

the oil. Then follows the *tostatura*, which gives the grains of rice firmness and flavour, without browning them. Wine is then tipped in and allowed to evaporate, then the cooking liquid, chicken, meat, fish or vegetable broth, brought to simmering point, is stirred in bit by bit, adding more as it gets absorbed by the rice. Both the *tostatura* and the subsequent careful stirring need to be done with vigour, bashing the starch out of the grains of rice, loosening them to form a sort of creamy blanket, accentuated by the *mantecatura* just before the end of cooking, where butter and grated parmesan are stirred in and the lot is left to settle off the heat for a while before serving.

Imagine this paragraph expanded to several pages with a manic perfectionist enthusiasm and you get some idea of Boucher's mission. Her six variations on this basic procedure are followed by 80 recipes, all with an enthusiastic introduction and meticulous instructions. There are classic recipes from all the rice-producing areas, and unusual, but authentic, local variations.

One of these, the hefty *panissa vercellese* is a hearty rib-sticking load of comfort food, including local beans from Saluggia, (similar to borlotti) and a soft regional sausage, *salam d'la duja*, *salame sotto grasso* (a well-seasoned fresh salame, preserved under a layer of lard, not to be confused with the *'nduja* of Calabria), and Barbera, a hefty red wine from Piedmont. The rice here is giving body to the store-cupboard stuff and cured meats of the winter months, as different as you can get from the golden glow of *risotto Milanese* (with or without the bone marrow) or the austere *risotto bianco* where the rice is allowed to speak for itself as the dominant voice in the ensemble. These two approaches show the polarities of the risotto: on one hand the rice is used as a vehicle for tasty and dominant, pungent ingredients, on the other it is to be savoured in its own right, its texture and delicate flavour accentuated by using a mild cooking liquid and delicately flavoured additions.

Recipes using vegetables include one for the tips of young nettles, or one with wild asparagus with its characteristic bitterness, another for a combination of red Treviso radicchio and slivers of pork fillet, or fennel and anchovies, or white asparagus and cinnamon, or tiny raw broad beans with melting lumps of robiola cheese, delicately seasoned with basil.

*Risi e bisi* gets a look in, though strictly speaking more of a *minestra* than a risotto, where tiny fresh young peas are cooked in broth made from their flavoursome pods, and served nice and runny, to eat with a spoon. *Riso alla pilota* is not really a risotto either, but rice cooked by evaporation, finished in a sealed pot after a rapid boil, the resulting separate grains seasoned before serving with a *pesto di maiale*, a crumbled not too fatty mass of pounded and lightly seasoned pork, fried in butter. Ample sustenance for the doughy labourers who pounded and winnowed the rice grains in a marble mortar, later mechanized to become wooden stampers moved up and down by water

power in the *pilota*. They worked in shifts, eating at different times, and this way of cooking rice kept the rice nice and warm and ready to eat for some time, unlike the conventional risotto.

A dish from Verona, where salt cod or stockfish are cooked to a milky whiteness (like a *brandade de morue*), we find crisp spears of young asparagus in a saffron-coloured risotto with a last-minute swirl of this *crema di baccalá*.

Garlic, rosemary and pancetta go into a rustic risotto; while *mela golden melinda*, a superior kind of Golden Delicious grown in the Val de Non, and a local cheese, *toma della Valsesia*, with a few sliced walnuts, make a characteristically local use of what is to hand, *kook met wat voorhanden is*; another local combination is sausage and chestnuts, with a seasoning of nutmeg; a Sardinian touch comes with using a combination of tiny artichokes, garlic and bottarga; the red radicchio of Treviso goes with *scamorza*, a smoked pulled cheese from the south of Italy; leeks and *funghi porcini* make a fine vegetarian risotto.

The book is illustrated with black and white line subjects and many (some rather muddy) monochrome photographs of the landscape and implements of traditional rice production. These are a unique visual record of north Italian rice culture, and whatever their short-comings a huge improvement on the superfluous colour photographs that hike up the cost of so many food publications. This book is a treasure trove of little known recipes and a lovingly researched account of a classic Italian dish and how to cook it. An English translation would be warmly welcomed.

GILLIAN RILEY

Alexis Gauthier: *Vegetronic*: Preface, 2013: 375 pp., hardback, £30.00

As soon as you open this book, you will experience the intense, pacy and passionate world of Alexis Gauthier. With full page, colour pictures of truffles, bright green jelly moulds and neon street signs, his diversity lends itself to the design as well as to the recipes and the tone. With recipes that range from mimosa sweets and bubblegum to black truffle polenta, this is far from being a book about vegetables – it is about a total love of food and fresh ingredients. It is a celebration of flavour and freshness and will change the way you cook vegetables.

ALICE RICHARDSON

Helena Attlee: *The Land where Lemons Grow: the Story of Italy and its Citrus Fruit*: Particular Books, 2014: 272 pp., hardback, £20.00.

Citrologists of the world will unite in welcoming this absorbing grand tour of the citrus-growing regions of Italy. A distinguished garden writer, Attlee fell under the spell of citrus over ten years ago and the resulting book is a zesty