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BOOK REVIEWS

PPC has always attempted to be helpful with its book reviews. So few food books get adequate coverage in the literary or broadsheet press. However, the list of books to be treated grows ever longer and I find it difficult to do justice to it. If any of you wishes to review something, or wishes to own something, just think that a short review will gain you the book – as well as our gratitude.

Oretta Zanini de Vita and Maureen B. Fant: *Sauces & Shapes, Pasta the Italian Way*: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013: 400 pp., hardback, $35.
Readers of Oretta Zanini de Vita's *Encyclopedia of Pasta* will be overjoyed to have this book. It complements her detailed description of the various kinds of pasta with the recipes that were too numerous to be included in an already big book. The *Encyclopedia* is a tightly organized work, bringing order and good humour to the huge range of information gathered during decades of research throughout Italy, and this companion volume has an equally sensible structure, allowing us to explore the delicate balance between sauce and shape in an undogmatic but rigorous manner. Oretta is fortunate to have her gifted and erudite translator, Maureen Fant, as co-author of *Sauces & Shapes*. Between them they reconcile the polarities of Italian and North American recipe writing, balancing the almost anal yearning of conscientious American cookery editors for precision where none is possible, with the passionate expression by dedicated Italian cooks of what to do and how to do it, in terms inexpressible in numbers and measurements. This creative tension is handled with great good humour and generosity of spirit, and the resulting compromises are lucid and often hilarious.

This book is much more than a collection of pasta recipes; it is one of the best works on Italian food I have read, explaining attitudes to cooking and eating, and full of detail and anecdote. It is about Italian cooking in Italian homes, not the Italian-inspired creations we meet in Italian restaurants abroad, or the versions of Italian food promulgated by egocentric foreign celebrity chefs. We learn how local conditions, habits and traditions can fossilize into dogma, or evolve with changes in circumstances, how innovation for its own sake is rare, but brilliant improvisation is a necessity. A cool look at our fashionable reverence for regional gastronomy is a reminder that many regions of Italy are in fact fairly recent and sometimes arbitrary political divisions, which cannot comfortably be applied to a cuisine. Instead Oretta has explored the cooking in tiny hamlets or remote valleys, in small hill-top towns, or sprawling seaside conglomerations, each with their own pasta shapes and recipes; she has talked to old ladies about family traditions and sourced products that, thanks to the

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publications of ENSOR and the Slow Food movement, are being rescued from extinction. This kind of information transcends regional stereotypes, we are simply given recipes that work, from traditional sources we can rely on. So the structure is based on recipe types not regions, with recommended pasta shapes for each recipe. There is also a section on how to make these different shapes. Finding one's way around is a bit of a struggle. The contents page lists the main sections, but not their contents, which are listed at the beginning of each section when you come to it; but it could have been helpful to have them right at the start of the book, to save some frantic searching. The glossary of pasta shapes is helpful, and the numerous sensitive line drawings are informative as well as decorative, and of great practical use in showing how to make and cook the different kinds of pasta. The rather garish colour photographs have been in most cases reproduced, inexplicably, larger than life, not helpful when meeting a dish for the first time – irritating and pointless.

Making fresh pasta by hand can take a lifetime's skill and many hours, or be done rapidly. The *tortellini* of Emilia, tiny little twisted knots enclosing a small amount, about the size of a pea, of a rich and complex filling, which can include Parma ham, pork, veal, mortadella and Parmesan cheese, are made by hand slowly and with care, cooked in a fine meat broth, and eaten with a spoon. The aromas of the broth, the fresh egg pasta and the complex filling are savoured slowly, the texture of the *tortellini* as complex as the flavours, where the double layers in the knot contrast with the transparent single layer enclosing the filling, melting on the tongue and yet chewy to the teeth. This dish used to be made only for special occasions, a few times in the year, as a special treat. The opposite is the rapid preparation of pinched or torn pasta from a batch of fresh dough, where little strips are rubbed and twisted between the palms of the hand to make *trofie* or *cecamariti* which can be tossed into a pan of boiling water and dressed with a simple sauce.

Good quality industrial pasta is not an inferior product, just different. Although the commercial varieties, from long thin threads to short chunky shapes, can determine the appropriate sauce, the general opinion, in home cooking, is gently pragmatic: most sauces go with most shapes. A loose rich sauce will slither down and adhere to long strands of slightly rough pasta, like spaghetti, or the voluptuous Bolognese *ragù* will cling to the smooth fresh egg *tagliatelle* with which it is served. Never, ever, even think for one moment of the gruesome combination of minced meat boiled in a tomato sauce that is the abomination known a *spag bol*. Don't go there.

We are told how short ridged tubes work so well with a dish of *pasta e fagioli*, as the dimension of the tube will hold a bean or two, bathed in sauce, making a voluptuous combination in the mouth. *Orecchiette* combine with crumbled sausage meat, a little dry chilli, garlic and tender-stem broccoli, the

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concave pasta holding bits of meat and sauce to contrast with the sprigs of the vegetable.

We meet strange combinations of ingredients – pasta cooked in a soup of salt cod, chickpeas and chestnuts: not a fanciful invention, simply a way of using cheap local things on non-meat days. Or the voluptuous combination of fried eggplants, grated smoked ricotta, and a tomato sauce that is *pasta alla norma* (and we get a convincing explanation of the name). The benign simplicity of the Roman *spaghetti al cascio e pepe* is given in its elemental form, a simple condiment of coarsely ground black pepper and *pecorino romano.*

A substantial main dish of pasta shapes with a tomato and swordfish sauce, or a light dish of spaghetti in a cream of red or yellow bell pepper, lightly seasoned with lemon and basil, are characteristic of the enthusiastic range of recipes. By now a bit in awe of the authors we follow their directions obediently, and are rewarded with dishes of considerable subtlety. This is a book to read and cook from with huge enjoyment.

Gillian Riley

Susan P. Mattern: *The Prince of Medicine: Galen in the Roman Empire*: Oxford University Press, 2012: 368 pp., hardback, £20.

Do readers of *PPC need* a biography on Galen? The answer must be affirmative. Galen was one of the most prolific authors of antiquity, with much of his therapy based on food, drink and stronger versions of these in drug form. He is our best authority on Greek and Roman foods. If you look up Andrew Dalby's *Food in the Ancient World from A to Z* (2003), Galen appears in many entries, 'hake' and 'heart' to take but two. Galen's many books on food, nutrition and the humours contain innumerable case studies and patient narratives of the kind used by Mattern in this volume. She collected all the medical cases in an earlier work, *Galen and the Rhetoric of Healing* (2008), and redeploys a number here. Writing Galen's biography is particularly problematic, since much of the evidence comes from this extremely ambitious and egotistical man himself, who presented himself to the world with such success that he dominated Western and Arabic medicine for a millennium and a half. Mattern's approach contrasts with Paul Moreau's, whose *Galien de Pergame* of 1985 is a series of quotations of Galen's own words.

Mattern treats the doctor thematically: Pergamum (Bergama in Turkey, where Galen was born), medical education, Rome (where he mainly practised), the gladiator school where he earned his spurs as a doctor, anatomy, etc. If this all sounds rather medical, much of the Rome chapter focuses on the grain dole to the poor and malnutrition. In his training, Galen was influenced by his father's experiments to discover whether tares were botanically related to wheat and barley or not (*On the Powers of Foods* 1.37). In his daily life, he