

BOOK REVIEWS

Gary Allen: *Herbs, A Global History*: Reaktion Books: 166 pp., hardback, £9.99.

A lavishly illustrated hard back, scarcely bigger than a bar of chocolate at under a tenner has to be an ideal gift. Allen's information-packed little book will send the recipient either scurrying to the kitchen to try his unfamiliar recipes or into the garden to plant up some of the exotica he describes. And he should have left it at that. In spite of the subtitle, Allen is clearly neither a historian nor a botanist, a cavalier treatment of scientific names and a plethora of 'howlers' mean that one quotes his 'facts' at one's peril. This is a shame because my first reaction was that *Herbs* would make a brilliant *aide-mémoire* for anyone lecturing to a WI or a gardening club. Never mind, his valiant attempt to answer the great unanswerable question 'What is a herb?' invariably posed by awkward members of these bodies to test their speakers, is well worth remembering. Wisely he does not involve himself in the complexities of medicinal herbs, but restricts himself to culinaries and it's his recipes that shine, such as the Australian technique of marinating Acacia flowers in brandy before deep frying them. Equally inviting is Moroccan 'Majoun', a health bar with a difference, though disappointingly one of its ingredients means that its consumption is probably limited to its homeland. Original uses of our native flora are not neglected, for instance using the seeds of the otherwise unpalatable wild carrot as a substitute for caraway is a novel idea with a definite appeal. Clearly then Allen is a writer whose interest in eclectic culinary herbs overrides all other considerations and he should not necessarily be faulted for that. All in all, it is definitely a book I am glad to have on my shelves, its infelicities notwithstanding.

ANTHONY LYMAN-DIXON

Giacomo Castelvetro, *The Fruit, Herbs and Vegetables of Italy (1614)*, Trans and ed Gillian Riley: Prospect Books, 2012, paperback, 151 pp., ISBN 978-1-903018-64-4, £12.00.

Prospect's new edition of Castelvetro's heartfelt plea to the Brits not only to eat more veg but to serve it up in an edible state, serendipitously coincides with the announcement in the trendy press that vegetables now form the main component of a meal. In London eateries meat, we are told,