

## 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,

has been relegated to a merely supporting role. However, whether salads will ever knock beef off its perch in the country at large is more doubtful for, as Jane Grigson pointed out in her foreword to an earlier edition, similar hopes expressed by John Evelyn in 1699 and Elizabeth David in 1950 achieved little. But unlike these later writers, Castelvetro explains the health-giving benefits of a delicious but esoteric range of plants. Ingredients are described which even today are only obtainable dried from the deli or as growing plants from the better sort of herb farm. Amongst them are mallows for constipation, pomegranates for the feverish, pine nuts to increase a man's supply of sperm and white lupins which although only appealing to 'pregnant women and silly children', fatten pigs, discourage moles and fertilize the fields. He enlivens the traditional soggy English boiled cabbage by adding beets, parsley, thyme, borage, bacon fat and garlic half way through the cooking process and serving it with pepper and grated cheese. Amongst his handy tips he advocates storing cuttings in honey, a technique still used by the lavender farmers of the USA, but long lost to the British.

Mention should also be made of Gillian Riley's erudite introduction in which Castelvetro comes over as an almost universally loved polymath who wholeheartedly embraced the Renaissance philosophy that 'the fruition of knowledge is in pleasure'. Sadly though, rather than enjoying a happy life, this otherwise remarkably gifted man let his tongue run away with him and incurred the wrath of the Inquisition. To save himself he fled to the grey muddy north, yearning for what Grigson describes as the 'Exquisite Sensation' which can only come from a sensible diet grown and eaten in bright sunlight. Writing this little book redolent with longing for the tastes and smells of his native Reggio Emilia must have been a sweet torture for him. A gourmet, skilled herbalist and brilliant classicist, if we cannot enjoy dinner with him in person, this is undoubtedly the next best thing.

ANTHONY LYMAN-DIXON

Tom Mueller: *Extra virginity: The Sublime and Scandalous World of Olive Oil*: Atlantic Books, 2012, 288pp., hardback, £18.99.

At the very beginning of his book about olive oil, Tom Mueller takes us to an archaeological site in Cyprus where, about 4,000 years prior, a disaster had struck. The catastrophe – likely an earthquake – an ancient manufacturing complex, a sort of early high-tech incubator with operations in ore smelting,