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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,

textile production, and perfume creation, all circled around mills and huge containers for processing olives into olive oil. Mueller describes how archaeologists gradually realized the olive oil fueled the other manufactures: it provided the raw material for the perfume, the industrial lubricant for the looms, and the fuel for the smelting.

Mueller's wide-ranging account of both the ancient history and the current politics surrounding the olive oil industry is one of the very few recent books on the subject. In it Mueller functions like the olive oil in the ancient Cypriot industrial centre, linking disparate disciplines in his book, half eulogy, half exposé. The author is a journalist and a long-time resident of Italy, excellently placed to write this account for the intelligent reader who may or may not be a neophyte to the world of *Olea europea*'s golden juice.

Mueller moves deftly back and forth between olive oil's importance (both in economic and religious terms) to classical civilizations, the fruit's biochemistry, and the politics of oil production and certification. Particularly shocking – and this is the book's exposé side – is the ease with which inferior grades of olive oil are passed off as extra-virgin, the consequences of which are not only that consumers are swindled but also that a distorted market (read: artificially low prices) for quality olive oil hurts honest producers. Mueller's thorough investigation reveals how despite the best efforts of American olive oil makers – a result of their dedication to quality, their Yankee ingenuity, and business acumen – the US Food and Drug Administration (the American governmental regulatory body) does little to interfere with olive oil fraud. Olive oil tampering is illegal, but it is not an immediate health risk in most cases, hence already-scarce enforcement resources cannot be dedicated to its prevention.

It was a pleasure too to have Mueller not fall into the trap of 'good fat, bad fat' during his lengthy (yet very readable) discussion of the health benefits of olive oil. The section on the discovery of olive oil's non-steroidal anti-inflammatory compounds, a sort of natural ibuprofen, was particularly fascinating. The cultured reader will appreciate the poems, quotations, and anecdotes with which the author spices the text. The journalist in Mueller gives the book a narrative flow, making the more intricate or technical parts of the book go down without any bitterness (though bitterness is a positive quality for olive oil, Mueller would remind us).

While I truly enjoyed the book, it is this narrative style which creates

book's only downside. Although mentioning the much mythologized 'Mediterranean diet' only in passing, Mueller implies several times that olive oil was 'an essential food' (7) and a daily staple in the Mediterranean past. In fact, olive oil was often the fat of choice for the rich: the poor produced it, but it was the rich owners who consumed it. Lard, which Mueller wants to confine above an imaginary line in the north of Italy, was in fact the fat not of choice but of necessity for many Italians, Greeks and Spaniards until recently.

Another problem perhaps created by the narration is the fairytale-like quality of Mueller's cast of characters. Numbers of oil enthusiasts (including one 2 year-old) are moved to tears when tasting good extra-virgin olive oil; this emotional response, which seemed excessive to this reader, was a theatrical device which was used too frequently, becoming irritating and ultimately ineffective. How many of us cry when we taste an excellent wine, or a delicious artisanal cheese? The book's *dramatis personae* were also often one-dimensional, almost stock characters. On one side the big corporations with smokestacks as stage decorations and grinning-yet-dishonest managers: the Bad Guys. For the Good Guys, a few wrinkled-yet-virtuous old farmers and a slew of the rich and famous: a Tuscan *marchesa*, a daughter of a Tuscan painter and a Neapolitan baroness, various 'scions' of rich families, university professors-turned-millionaire entrepreneurs, members of families of diplomats, titled nobles with castles, a newspaper heiress, a Phillips-Andover/Harvard graduate, and several Horatio Alger stories (including one who actually won the Horatio Alger Award).

One has to wonder if these are not simply the lucky descendents of the *latifundisti* of the past who appropriated all the peasants' oil. All are seemingly genuinely passionate about olive oil, but their privileged upbringing makes their determination to 'educate the consumer' sound self-interested at best, condescending at worst. Avoiding olive oil's past as a locus of class division and inadvertently underlining the role of the rich in its present does not help Mueller with his appeal for a more democratized consumption.

Mueller's glossary was very useful, as well as his section on choosing good olive oil. After eight pages of acknowledgements and another six blank pages before I reached the back cover, I was disappointed to find neither a selected bibliography nor an index. Both would be important to a book that is not simply a collection of recipes and anecdotes about olive oil. I

admit that this is likely an academic conceit, comparable to complaining about the lack of a page dedicated to a note about the font – many readers are unlikely to care – but it would have rounded out well what is otherwise a commendable and important book. The book's website, www.extravirginity.com, is a great additional research tool which extends and complements the book. Highly recommended.

ZACHARY NOWAK

Jean-Marc Carité: *Pourriture Noble et Vengeance Tardive*: Utovie, 2010, 248 pp., paperback, €11.40; *Araignée Rouge et Cigogne Noire*: Utovie, 2011, 231 pp., paperback, €11.40.

Alcohol in some form has always had a role in detective fiction, but these two titles represent a new and unique genre in which misdeeds and murder mix with organic viticulture, a dash of sex and the occasional aroma of regional cuisine – *poulet rôti aux Sauternes*, *poêlée landaise*.

In each book the plot, which advances largely through dialogue, pits the forces of good (scientifically rationalized organic practices) against the forces of evil (represented by producers and distributors of agri-chemicals along with dishonest wine companies and local government officials), with the former triumphant at the end. In *Pourriture Noble* the dashing, wine-loving detective Lecoanet is called in to investigate the sudden death of a head of an old wine-making family (discovered in a vat of Sauternes); in *Araignée Rouge* he helps discover the reason for sterility problems in vignerons in the fictional region of 'Coteaux de Maillan' in south-west France.

There's plenty of detail of vineyard management, winemaking and wine appreciation, even if the text at times comes close to back-label winespeak, and although the crime component might sometimes be seen as subordinate to an *éloge du bio* it is also good-natured entertainment.

BARBARA SANTICH

Hattie Ellis, *What to Eat? 10 Chewy Questions about Food*: Portobello Books, 2012, 440 pp., paperback, £14.99.

What to Eat? taps into the increasing middle class paranoia over what we should be eating. It explores questions such as 'what is sustainable fish?', 'does any diet work?' and 'what is a green kitchen?'. Hattie Ellis has gained a glowing reputation for her investigative journalism (her book *Planet Chicken* won the Derek Cooper Award for investigative writing in 2008) and *What*