

taking place over the long eighteenth century. He has read widely; he writes well; the subject is a gripper. Not a lot to do with food, I admit, but read it none the less. I would have liked greater attention to the French and a closer look at the parallels between England and the rest of Europe. A handsome book too.

Claudia Roden: *The Food Of Spain*: Michael Joseph (Penguin), 2012, 512pp., hardback: £25.00

Shortly after chef Pepe Rodríguez Rey, who cooks near Toledo, won Spain's 2011 National Gastronomy Prize, he commented that, for him, 'el toque en la cocina se aprende en casa.' In other words, the touch – or essence – of good cooking is learned at home. Straightforward as it sounds, in a country where the limelight now falls almost entirely on restaurant cooking – even homely dishes are generally 'perfected' by chefs for the media – one is grateful to hear the idea.

One is appreciative, then, that Claudia Roden dedicated five years of research to teasing out what Pepe's comment means on the ground. In her large and beautiful new book, *The Food of Spain*, she explores edible Spain across time and place, celebrating its diversity, human and geographic, as a source of creativity. This central theme is an important one. As historian Raymond Carr jokingly put it, Spain is a country with as many *chorizos* as virgins.

Roden herself uses humour to approach another key theme, the extent to which Spanish cooking today is a construct of reality. Reinvention of tradition has played a part in that, often creatively, but modern branding operations have been less positive in tilting our understanding of influences, regions, dishes and produce. Roden deals with this by passing on all kinds of people's thoughts and differences of opinion, often, one guesses, with a smile, sometimes, perhaps with a wince.

In her choice of just over 200 recipes she picks many dishes new to readers abroad. What a lovely surprise to find *farínes*, the northern corn gruel served up in its modern meaty form; *arnadí*, Valencia's sweet potato or pumpkin pudding; *sopeao*, southern tomato sops. Humble in origin, these dishes resist the idea of perfection. Every hand may bring something special to them.

Other delicious things come from affluent home cooking: roast chicken with apples and grapes, fish in saffroned béchamel, a chocolate and chestnut custard. Here the book leans away from the frugal central

tableland towards the Mediterranean. Roden writes that Catalan cooking is ‘the richest, most complex and sophisticated of Spain’, handing on an idea that has currency abroad, but perhaps due a mix-up over the culinary ‘*paises catalanes*’, akin to associating all southern French cooking with Languedoc. (On home ground conventional wisdom, even among most Catalan chefs, reserves the accolades for both home and restaurant cooking for the Basque country.) On the whole, though, the regionalism is subtle, helped by recipe variations that evoke how dishes travel and are cooked with great freedom of spirit.

Beyond the recipes there is much of interest. At the book’s heart lie historical essays. Roden writes densely and with passion on Spain’s Muslim and Jewish cooking, a complex subject that requires filtering wide and deep sources to set local detail against the bigger picture. Especially useful is her unravelling of Muslim cooking’s various strands that are usually written confusingly as one tradition. This perspective is of great value for both scholars and hands-on cooks.

A wish-list for a paperback edition might note that Jason Lowe’s photographs bring a richly coloured visual narrative to the book, but occupy over a quarter of it. Perhaps some of the space might be given over to text exploring other areas of history in more depth and playing with the leisurely domestic detail that gives *A Book of Middle Eastern Food* its timeless sense. One feels that this book, in contrast, is a time-capsule, capturing the cooking of an affluent epoch that may well soon come to a close. But there is much to celebrate here and cook with Claudia Roden’s own enthusiasm – and toque – sending one scuttling to look for the paella pan.

VICKY HAYWARD

Helen Leach, Mary Browne, Raeline Inglis: *The Twelve Cakes of Christmas: an evolutionary history with recipes*: Otago University Press, 2012, 192 pp., hardback: £24.50.

Building on her earlier ‘significant study...of a vexed question’ (PPC 89), *The Story of the Pavlova*, Helen Leach and her co-authors here explore the history of what is still for most of us an essential part of Christmas cuisine – the cake. Underpinning her approach is the idea of the recipe as a proxy-artefact or piece of material culture, and a text that ‘encodes the flavour and texture of a dish-in-waiting’. Recipes matter more to cake-makers than to, say, stew-makers, since variations in proportions, temperatures, and