

David Gentilcore: *Italy and the Potato: A History, 1551–2000*: Continuum, 2012, 257pp., hardback, £60.00.

David Gentilcore: *Pomodoro! A History of the Tomato in Italy*: Columbia University Press, 2010, 254 pp., hardback, £18.95.

Do not be abashed at the price of potatoes, I fear it is standard for too many books nowadays (NB not Prospect, which is perhaps why I'm only having one holiday this year). Columbia University are rather kinder to us if we want to read about tomatoes. Generally the Americans are more creative in their pricing of books that might have a wider audience than four university libraries in the north-east. David Gentilcore is professor of early modern history at Leicester University. He is my new star food writer. Because here we have a professor who writes English that you and I can understand. He has written three books on foodstuffs in Italy: the potato, the tomato, and maize (and the resulting pellagra). The maize book is still in Italian so I have not noticed it here. I can't recommend highly enough the potato book. It's just gripping. I say go and get it from your library. I'm not even going to even rehearse the fascinating information it retails about the how the potato was absorbed into Italian culture and agriculture, and how the history of the crop is enmeshed in the deeply absorbing history of Italian upland zones. I should, by way of parenthesis, here urge the claims of the well-received book by Julia Blackburn called *Thin Paths*, Jonathan Cape, £17.99. Many of you will have read this moving account of life in the Ligurian alps, apparently somewhere behind Ventimiglia. It's just wonderful on the feel of the place, the life of its survivors and the impact of war and societal change. However, where it fell down as a book was it was a bit high on the emotion and a bit low on the history and what I wished really was that Ms Blackburn had spent more time teaching us historical realities. Professor Gentilcore fills in some of her gaps on the whole topic of rural depopulation and the profound changes that the Italian back-country has gone through (just like the French I suppose. Did anyone notice the sale of a complete hamlet in the Limousin the other day? And this was an auction reprised after the failure of the first one, when there were no bids. The tomato book is a cracker too, it is after all a fascinating subject which takes in everything from sixteenth-century botany to twentieth-century industrialization, fascist propaganda, and social change surrounding increased mobility and mass media. All in 214 pages of text with plenty of illustrations.