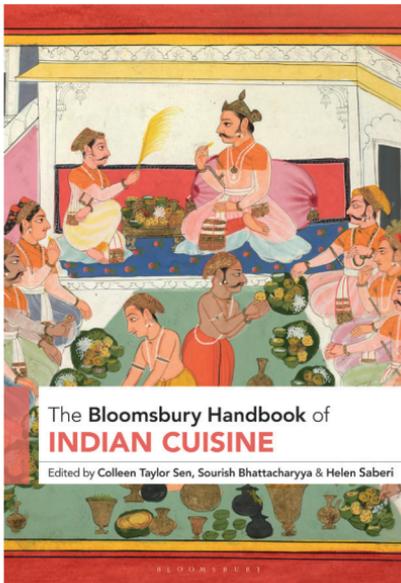


BOOK REVIEW

Colleen Taylor Sen, Sourish Bhattacharyya, Helen Saberi, (eds.), *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Indian Cuisine*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023, 430 pp. ISBN 978-1-350-12863-7.



All three editors write well and knowledgeable on the food of the subcontinent: two of them are practised encyclopedists. Where will their new work stand on the bookselves? I place it somewhere between an *Oxford Companion* (informal), a *Cambridge Companion* (academic) and a *Routledge Encyclopedia* (tough to read). Having begun at A, I soon discover that the present format suits me rather well.

There's as much as I would have wanted to find on most topics; there's not so very much that I could do without. I keep on reading. Just one thing: I would have liked a 'handbook' to help me to construct some Indian food, offering me a sample recipe or two, but, fair enough, that was not the plan.

Nonetheless there is plenty to read about specific ingredients from Rice to Ice by way of Mango, Millets and Pulses. 'Alcohol' gave me food for thought, though this article is perhaps too long and undigested. But in any reference book some pages will be more impressive than others. Many articles about Indian states and cities are excellent, written by authors who are mentally tasting as they write. On Assam, Bihar, Goa, Jammu and Kashmir, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Odisha and Tamilnadu I learned a great

deal and enjoyed the process. I also had much to learn, and I think others would too, from the excellent long articles ‘Breads’ (by Megha Kohli), ‘Spice box’ (by Sourish Bhattacharyya) and ‘Rites of passage’ (by Priya Mani); also from shorter pieces on Chinese Indian cuisine, Mughals, Palghat Iyers, Parsis, Railway food and Soft drinks. Quirlier articles on Butter chicken and on some famous restaurants are among the most enjoyable. The biographies in this book, though always brief, are well worth finding.

Publishing every day in every way doesn't get better and better: here are a couple of ways in which a ‘handbook’ like this could be improved. It's alphabetical, and that makes it easy to navigate, but it makes the spacious alphabetical contents list a waste of ten pages. Give me a three-page subject index of articles instead. The index is made the way Microsoft Word made indexes thirty years ago: for ‘cumin’ I see 61 undifferentiated page numbers. A reader is hardly likely to use such an index entry, so why print it? But having said this I must add that at its currently advertised paperback price, ‘available 22 August 2024’, this book will be a bargain. Buy it and be thankful.

ANDREW DALBY

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Andrew Dalby writes on food history, always working from original sources. He studied at St John's College, Cambridge, and University College London. He lives in France, grows fruit and makes cider. A part-time PhD at Birkbeck College, London, was his introduction to food history. His dissertation was revised as *Siren Feasts* (Routledge, 1996), and in the same year he and Sally Grainger published *The Classical Cookbook* (British Museum Press, 1996). Later food history books include *Food in the Ancient World from A to Z* (Routledge, 2003), *Flavours of Byzantium* (Prospect Books, 2003), *The Shakespeare Cookbook* (with Maureen Dalby: British Museum Press, 2012) and *Gifts of the Gods* (with Rachel Dalby: Reaktion Books, 2018). He has translated three source texts, all published by Prospect Books: *Cato On Farming* (1998), *Geoponika: Farm Work* (2011), and *The Treatise of Walter of Bibbesworth* (2012).