

BOOK REVIEWS

The pile of food and cookery books I assembled to prepare a Christmas round-up for the *Guardian* must have topped four feet six inches. So great the press of titles that I can but give a summary appraisal here; so tight the space in the *Guardian*, that I could mention no more than a tithe of them.

Books that are more than recipe collections, either adding understanding and context to their culinary instructions, or being entirely concerned with understanding, with not a recipe in sight, are considered first.

For a dizzy voyage through the marginal thickets of Western speculative thought, there can be no better than Tristram Stuart's *The Bloodless Revolution: Radical Vegetarians and the Discovery of India* (Harper Press, £25). If you guzzle beef today, you may not tomorrow after exposure to this account of vegetarianism since the English Civil War. The shocking (to them) Renaissance discovery that Indians didn't eat meat yet were as strong and considerably longer-lived than the slaving carnivores of Europe is lent a certain symmetry by the reconversion of Mahatma Gandhi to eating greens after reading Thoreau and others. During the centuries covered by this philosophical full circle, Stuart touches on a multitude of radical and left-leaning eccentrics, whose extreme opinions nonetheless had surprising and significant effects on mainstream opinion. This is brilliant stuff.

A learned work just appearing is Robert Appelbaum's *Aguecheek's Beef, Belch's Hiccup, and Other Gastronomic Interjections: Literature, Culture and Food among the Early Moderns* (University of Chicago Press, £19). It deals here and there in the same coin as Tristram Stuart (Thomas Tryon, Francis Bacon, J.-J. Rousseau) but is an assessment of the meaning of food and feeding, of their relation to civility and human behaviour and the way this is expressed in contemporary literature – that written at the moment, and as Classics translated. Appelbaum's wide scholarship affords a fine *vade mecum* to the writing of the time (English, French, Italian and Spanish) and to modern glosses thereon. His curiosity impels him towards a deeper understanding of the smallest interjections in Shakespeare – hence Belch's hiccup and its connection to pickled herrings (and what Yarmouth's red herrings might signify to a Lévi-Strauss view of things as well as to a Papal table) – indication that the book yields many perspectives on familiar prose and poetry. A chapter to be treasured is that dealing with cookbooks as

literature; another winner discusses Cockaigne and other Utopias.

Equally academic, and important for serious students, is *Food in Medieval England: Diet and Nutrition*, edited by C.M. Woolgar, D. Serjeantson, and T. Waldron (Oxford University Press, £55). As the acknowledgements state, 'many of the papers in this volume had their genesis in meetings of the Diet Group at Somerville College, Oxford.' Seventeen papers survey categories of foodstuffs on the one hand, and discuss diet and nutrition on the other, without ever mentioning a culinary source. We do get some pretty impressive accounts of things like gardens and garden produce; the naming of meats; pig husbandry and pork consumption; fish consumption; the consumption and supply of birds; hunting practices; seasonal patterns of food consumption; and diet and demography. Evidence from domestic and accounting records, as well as archaeological material, are in high relief. The bibliography is of great utility.

A book has come out of America on the Atlantic fish business and its relation both to the food we eat and the discovery of the New World. It is *Fish on Friday* by Brian Fagan (Basic Books, £15.99). It certainly has its points as a useful summary of most Atlantic activity up until the 18th century, although one was struck when reading the text at the number of literal errors in the spelling of proper names. There is a digression into carp, and there is much on the medieval Atlantic trade, as well as something on the Romans; there is a peppering of recipes.

A fish book that I have never mentioned, that came out earlier in the year, is Lindsey Bareham's *Fish Store* (Michael Joseph, £20). As she observes at the start, 'When my sons inherited their father's childhood home, a converted pilchard factory [at Mousehole], I thought it would be a good idea to record some of the recipes and memories associated with this unusual place.' Lindsey's recipes are reliable and useful, what better qualities? The book is not so much a fish cookery manual, but more a gathering of recipes (many of which are for fish) that have been cooked in this house, so you get sherry trifle with plums to round out your roast cod with watercress-crushed potatoes. You also get a feel for Mousehole and the prose is reinforced by excellent photographs old and new. (Students of book design may take note of the decision to contain the photographs within eight-page sections, leaving the text a typographical unity.)

An old-fashioned book which reminds one of the days of André Simon is Simon Courtauld's *Food for Thought: Fish and Feather: a Culinary Tour of*

Britain's Seas and Skies (Think Books, £9.99). This is a collection of little pieces, first printed in *The Spectator*. As that magazine has declined in spark and intelligence over the last decade, perhaps this book should be ignored. Some would say charming, others nugatory.

Elisabeth Luard's *Truffles* (Frances Lincoln, £20) is altogether more enticing. Without abandoning the proprieties of grammar and style, it does a bit of work on the subject and offers plenty of information for the curious. Meeting Elisabeth at breakfast one morning, when she regaled us with quite worrying samples of super-truffle pong (I am not sure it mixes with toast and marmalade and a delicate stomach), one recognized immediately an enthusiast, a thorough one at that. Highly recommended, as are, for once, the photographs.

Those concerned with more pressing matters will find much to instruct in Warren Belasco's *Meals to Come: A History of the Future of Food* (University of California, £13.95). Here is a succinct account of views on the shrinking planet over the past century, gathered from theorists and think-tanks, and from science fiction too. We have made a sorry mess of futurology, missing population trends by a factor of three, dishing up the utterest codswallop and propaganda as guaranteed fact. I found his opening chapters, where he summarizes the broad avenues of approach of Malthusians, ecologists and others concerned with diet and future trends, most enlightening. His discussion of Utopian and science-fiction literature was particularly revealing to one who does not usually have much truck with it.

Heston Blumenthal may not be worried by the ecological footprint of the odyssey he undertook *In Search of Perfection* (Bloomsbury, £20), the book of the television series, pillaging five continents for the secrets of classics like spaghetti, pizza, treacle tart and Black Forest gâteau. Although there are recipes, the fun is in the hunting. While science is Blumenthal's forte – his number-one haircut makes physical the term egghead – it is a background theme to his preoccupation with flavour and texture and the best means to capture these. The style is matter-of-fact, the narrative dynamic. Whether anyone will attempt to replicate his experiments at home is immaterial. Along the way he gives so many deathless facts that a reading can't fail to improve the quality of life: hence my gallons of Golden Syrup ageing in the oven, pounds of forerib hanging from the cellar roof and microscope on order to better inspect the surface indentations of spaghetti.

Context and recipes coexist in Giorgio Locatelli's *Made in Italy Food*

& *Stories* (Fourth Estate, £27.99): large, handsome – more concrete block than brick – and embellished by Dan Lepard’s fine photographs. The context embraces Giorgio, his family and professional life while guiding us effortlessly through some of the riches of Italian foodways. The information he imparts is sufficient for the generality of reader, though sometimes not precise enough for an encyclopaedia article. His comments, however, on his culinary preferences and reasons for choosing one material over another are always interesting and seem founded on good practice. Most of the recipes are painstaking and lucid. However, the ‘foolproof’ recipe for focaccia was not proof against this fool, thanks to sloppy expression of critical factors. I might embark here on a riff about recipes and their accuracy. For example, I might ask why the *River Café Pocket Book* series (published by Ebury Press with titles *Pasta and Ravioli*; *Salads and Vegetables*; *Puddings, Cakes and Ice Creams*; *Fish and Shellfish*, at £8.99 each) contains a recipe for Penne alla carbonara which uses 350g of penne with a sauce containing 200g pancetta, 6 egg yolks, 120 ml double cream and 100g of parmesan to serve four people. However, in *River Café Book 1*, a recipe to serve six people has only 250g of penne to exactly the same quantities of sauce ingredients. One might also at that point question yet again the River Café ladies’ inclusion of their recipe for crab. It seems as if I am the only person to take issue with their instruction to take a lively two-pound crab, tip it up on your kitchen table, and cut it merrily in half, presumably with the usual domestic kitchen knife. Not only, in my experience, would the crab object strenuously to this treatment, but also most people’s kitchen knives would not be up to the task. I would ask the ladies next time they put this recipe in to include instruction on humane means to kill the crab before attempting its bisection. I am also struck by the immense difficulty that recipe writers have of describing satisfactorily the processes involved in making pastry.

The same publishers that did Locatelli are responsible, in an identical spirit of spacious design, for Andrew Whitley’s *Bread Matters* (Fourth Estate, £20) which puts flesh on the bare bones of a recipe in an extensive discussion of our daily loaf. Whitley favours back-to-basics, whole grains, no additives, proper methods, and delivers an unsettling indictment of industrial baking. Do it yourself. A fuller, more measured review is below.

Here might come a riff on cookery-book design. Fourth Estate’s

embrace of serif type, very broad margins and generous leading adds immeasurably to the legibility of these two books. Too many designers seem straining for novelty and modernity. They appear addicted to sans serif; to jiggering about with the density and colour of ink; to modish counterpoint of page and text colour. Not one of which assists our understanding or our reading. In most cases, this doesn't matter too much, but there is one book in particular I found so aggressively designed as to be unusable: *Cooking* by Tom Aikens (Ebury Press £25). Chefs, of course, will be rushing for this book. In English terms, even possibly European, he is a good and modish practitioner (even though his restaurant is so stuffy it refuses entrance to people insufficiently, in its view, dressed up). But the book is completely illegible, the type as faint as the delirious squiggles of a dying spider, the layout not at all clear.

Students of British food are well served this season by Harper Press's reissue of our very own *Traditional Foods of Britain* in the new guise of *The Taste of Britain* (£25). There is no need to extol the quality of the information but merely to compliment the new publishers and the authors, Laura Mason and Catherine Brown, on the revised format. It is now hardbound, generously ornamented with Victorian engravings, and larded with comments from contemporary chefs. The matter is arranged according to region rather than commodity. Although I have not seen it, there has been warm reception for Mark Hix's *British Regional Food* (Quadrille, £25) with recipes and much information about present-day suppliers. Postscript: eventually the publishers did deliver the book, though too late for their commercial benefit, and what one had heard is confirmed on inspection. The text and background material is of equal importance to the recipes and is nicely written and eminently readable. A recommended buy.

Recipe books can be usefully grouped into those that take you beyond your usual culinary rut and those which merely serve to sharpen current practice. In the first would fall Fuschia Dunlop's *Revolutionary Chinese Cookbook* (Ebury, £25) which contains repertoire-stretching things like Junshan Chicken with Silver-Needle Tea appended to a portrait of the little-known province of Hunan that was Chairman Mao's favourite cuisine (see also Chairman Mao's Red-Braised Pork, as well as General Tso's Chicken, the Taiwanese history of which she first revealed at the Oxford Symposium and reprints in brief here). She obviously had a tremendous time when staying in Hunan: a constant round of banquets and merry-making, as well

as revealing encounters with aged and much decorated chefs.

Further travel in the Far East will be encouraged by an American import from Ten Speed Press, *Into the Vietnamese Kitchen* by Andrea Nguyen (imported into England by Publishers Group Worldwide, \$35). We eat much less Vietnamese food than either the French, Americans or Australians, but I need not dwell on its innate qualities. This book offers both a wide range of recipes, well buttressed by contextual material. It's a pity that the photographs are of the food alone and not of life in Vietnam itself.

Meanwhile, in *The Calcutta Kitchen* (Mitchell Beazley, £20) Simon Parkes and Udit Sarkhel (aided not a little by photographer Jason Lowe) evoke the hurry of Calcutta streets and their satisfying foods, not least their sweetmeats and desserts, with Bhapa doi (a steamed sweetened yoghurt) rivalling crème caramel in the comfort-pudding stakes. Bengalis are big on fish but the recipes are spread evenly across our standard ingredients. Once you've done your shopping, they are very clear to follow. In much the same manner as Fuschia Dunlop, it becomes clear from Simon Parkes's linking narrative that he had an awfully good time living in Calcutta. Here I should also mention the nuanced evocation of the same cuisine by Chitrita Banerji, *Bengali Cooking* (reissued in paperback by Serif, £9.99).

Those keen on the East who wish to travel further than Bengal, but have not yet bought their ticket, might be advised to study the book *Curry* put together by Dorling Kindersley (£16.99). An impressive list of contributors including Sri Owen, David Thompson, Vivek Singh of The Cinnamon Club, and Das Sreedharan of Rasa restaurants, have gathered curries and a few associated dishes from most south Asian countries, as well as Africa, the Caribbean, Britain and Japan. Very enlightening and very doable. Question: what is a curry? When is a curry not a curry? Is the sauce the defining element?

Travel of another sort may be encouraged by *The Hairy Biker's Cookbook* by Dave Myers and Si King (Michael Joseph, £20). Their television series is loved by some; they rush off on their bikes to unlikely locations cooking up *al fresco* dishes. Cheerful cooking for the bigger man; neither of them is a cook by profession. Perhaps a cultural, rather than culinary, artefact.

Whole-world cookery is also treated in *Classic One Pot Cooking* (Apple Press, £14.99). A sort of bed-sitter's guide.

Mage Publishers of Washington DC have once more produced a book from Najmieh Batmanglij, with contributions on wine and Persian poetry

by Dick Davis, and on pairing wine with Persian food by Burke Owens. It is called *From Persia to Napa: Wine at the Persian Table* (\$50, available in England from Gazelle Books Ltd, White Cross Mills, Hightown, Lancaster, LA1 4XS at £43.50). There is a full palette of Persian dishes, all thoroughly appetizing, opening with seven soups, and closing with a score of pretty sweet desserts and drinks. But the chief point of the book is perhaps to reacquaint Persian food with its natural accompaniment, wine – not terribly in favour with the present regime, though liberal libations were once the order of the day. In the Napa Valley some reconnection of the two mediums is being achieved at the Darioush Winery. A lavish book of great interest.

Nearer to home, Silvena Rowe has written *Feasts: Food for Sharing from Central and Eastern Europe* (Mitchell Beazley, £20). Ms Rowe is a Bulgarian and once cooked at Books for Cooks in Notting Hill. This is a very useful repertoire of big-flavoured dishes that might help one through the winter. They are also not impossible – always a recommendation. A chapter to be treasured is that on dumplings and *pierogi*: very instructive.

Another cook who has practised her art at Books for Cooks is Ursula Ferrigno. Her *Complete Italian Cookery Course* (Mitchell Beazley, £20) is often recommended as a useful repository of satisfying recipes. That we came to blows in this house over her instructions for *calzone* is probably nothing to do with her, but I will quote her instructions in the hope that someone can explain what she actually means. She is talking of making up the ‘trouser leg’ which she has already rather gnomically remarked is ‘not quite the shape you might imagine’: ‘Roll out [the dough] into a rectangle 38 x 20 cm. Spread the onion mixture over the dough, leaving a 1 cm margin all round. Fold the dough lengthways into three, bringing the ends over to enclose the filling, and place on a greased tray.’ Even as I have written these sentences in the company of my colleague Wendy Baker, we have had a violent difference on their real meaning.

Jennifer McLagan’s *Cooking on the Bone* has already been mentioned when it came out as *Bones* in the USA (HarperCollins). Grub Street has issued it for the English market (£20). A book that has a recipe for fish head curry must deserve a prize.

If you would rather travel in the mind, of all the chefs’ books this season, David Everitt-Matthias’s *Essence, Recipes from Le Champignon Sauvage* (Absolute Press, £25), his restaurant in Cheltenham, is the one: great

recipes, great descriptions of larder essentials – his store cupboard consists of duck confit, duck gizzard confit, tomato confit with lemon, salted grapes, salted lemons, salted sardines, salted sardine tapenade, soured cabbage (a quick form of sauerkraut), Maury syrup (a reduction of Maury sweet red wine from the Roussillon), white port and verjus syrup, pickled apples, spiced bread, and marinated prunes in Armagnac. His style is disarming and the recipes will extend your repertoire without being too thoroughly stupid, for example: braised blade of beef with nettle risotto and spring onions, chump of lamp with pea purée, wilted lettuce and eucalyptus foam, brown trout with wild garlic quinoa and roasted garlic cream and prune and burdock iced mousse with toasted almond ice-cream – and how about crème brûlée of chervil tubers with brioche ice-cream and mandarin jelly? Dinner parties will never be the same.

I have already mentioned Tom Aikens, who is certainly worth investigation, and who provokes memory of the two chefs' autobiographies I've read this season: *White Slave* by Marco Pierre White (Orion, £20) and *Humble Pie* by Gordon Ramsay (HarperCollins, £18.99). Strange how two such arrogant individuals can highjack falsely modest titles. On the disgust stakes, Marco Pierre White wins hands down. A more repellent character is difficult to conjure, though he effortlessly manages it himself through the medium of his ghosted memoirs. A chapter in Gordon Ramsay on the same subject (MPW) adds several nails to the coffin. Surprisingly, the Ramsay effort (which does seem to be his own writing – explanation perhaps for the constant reiteration of the epithet 'fucking' which seems the only adjective in his quiver) makes the memoirist a less offensive character, or less of a bully, than I had expected; though still not sympathetic. The presumption underlying all these chefs' memories (and I include Anthony Bourdain's here) is that bad behaviour and machismo are an inevitable concomitant of good cooking. This attitude has entered the collective perception of kitchen life and must be disputed. There are brilliant chefs (as well as brilliant cooks, to make the reasonable distinction between the two) who are balanced, polite and normal. The misapprehension that kitchens are brutal is as wrong-headed as the old-style approach to military discipline that had recruits enduring needless cruelty and humiliation in order to better maim the enemy. Sociologists are going to have fun with our current crop of loquacious kitchen boys. Both come from inauspicious backgrounds, though MPW was part of a cheffing family. Both left school as

soon as they could and have yet been able to rise magnificently above their troubled youths, adopting without effort the camouflage and trappings of the social groups to which they pander (and in both there is a joyful and explicit embrace of plutocratic display). For detail and local colour of kitchen craft, MPW is, surprisingly, more informative than Ramsay. Both are brilliant chefs and some inkling of the skill required is imparted by *White Slave*. Neither offers much assistance in understanding the transition that both authors underwent from kitchen technician to capitalist entrepreneur. The acquisition of this whole new skill-set is shrouded in mystery and one would like to know far more of the mechanics involved: for example, are they both puppets of some evil moneymaker, or were they both in exactly the right place at the right time to take advantage of the opportunities offered on the one hand by the Forte organization, and on the other by Blackstone? MPW, of course, is exceptional for never having (effectively at least) gone to France, or worked there. He rose entirely on the backs of English-based chefs and restaurants, never sipping at the fount of *haute cuisine*. There is almost no humour in either book, too much perhaps to expect, but MPW's anecdote of cooking for the Prince of Wales, when HRH, confused by the chef's christian names, addressed him entirely in French, is a classic. Should one buy these books for little Johnny who wants to take up cooking? Certainly the apple of one's eye needs to have a balanced personality so as not to be thrown emotionally off-course by them, but severally they do give some impression, both of the great skills of the authors – matters to celebrate and to acknowledge – and of the difficulties of kitchen life.

For a refresher course of new ideas, Jamie Oliver's *Cook with Jamie* (Penguin, £26) will help you cheerfully along the Mediterranean route, though Thomasina Miers's *Cook* (Collins, £16.99) or Allegra McEvedy's *Colour Cookbook* (Kyle Cathie, £19.99) will deal in the same robust and colourful flavours while offering a change of tone to the ever-present Oliver. Apprehensive hostesses (and hosts indeed) may find comfort in the precise instructions for thoroughly modern (which of course means slightly traditional) cooking in *Something for the Weekend, with eight around the table*, by Ruth Watson (Quadrille, £25). The USP is that all the recipes serve eight. I must admit that almost every suggestion attracts, and although Ms Watson has adopted a public persona of thorough unpleasantness (see her TV show, *The Hotel Inspector*) she comes over in this book as exquisitely

helpful. Those seeking comforting and doable would be well advised to turn also to Trish Hilfrety's *Gastropub Classics* (Absolute, £20). Her *Lobster and Chips* of last year was really good and this is more of the same sort of cooking: toothsome, unsophisticated flavours and minimal technical difficulty solving problems for hungry families.

Vegetables have a fair run for their money with Peter Gordon's *Vegetables The New Food Heroes* (Quadrille, £18.99) – modern recipes from a master of fusion; and Sophie Grigson's *Vegetables* (Collins, £25) – recipes for more than seventy plants. Ms Grigson must have worried about the shadow or lustre of her mother's book on the same subject and I guess you might say that the recipes are somewhat more up-to-date. My wife Sally, a loyal fan of JG, would never claim better. And then we have Gregg Wallace's *Vég The Greengrocer's Cookbook* (Mitchell Beazley, £20). Not just a greengrocer but also a cook; with information on dealing with each type (seasonality, storage, purchase, basic cooking), and eclectic recipes.

Turning painlessly from vegetables to pies and pastry, three should be noted. Many have recommended Angela Boggiano's *Pie* (Cassell, £20). The combination of photography and pretty straight recipes is comforting for the apprehensive beginner: there's something about doing pies for dinner that makes you a consummate home-maker. A big dish topped by golden pastry seems a step up from the brown stew that is its essential ingredient. Alternatively Philippa Vanstone's *Tarts and Pies* (Grub Street, £20) is entirely sweet food, not a stew in sight. I have to admit to always wanting the filling and never the pie; which leads me gently on to the most characterful book this season, as well as unput-downable, which is Rose Carrarini's *Breakfast, Lunch, Tea* (Phaidon, £19.95). I think the most enjoyable shop, during a stint in London in the early '90s, was the first Villandry in Marylebone High Street which was opened by Jean-Charles and Rose Carrarini to sell an extremely small and über-expensive range of fresh and processed French foods to eager customers such as myself, whose weekly return home with overladen baskets was invariably greeted by ecstatic ululations from wife and daughters. Later, they opened a larger and less satisfactory version and then disappeared to Paris where, at The Rose Bakery, they have brought off the same trick in reverse, beating back slaving queues of Parisians from the wonders of English food producers. At the same time they have a restaurant where baked goods and fairly simple cooking can be sampled and this book is a record of their recipes and their venture. I recommend the

recipes and I recommend the book for its idiosyncratic design, and above all I recommend the surreal portraits of executants and customers – Juliet Greco is not yet dead, talk about monotones. Highly recommended.

For my part, the familiar and irreplaceable qualities of Janet Ross's *Leaves from our Tuscan Kitchen* (reissued by Grub Street, £12.99) or the remarkable description of bourgeois cooking as it should be from the 1950s by Patience Gray and Primrose Boyd, *Plats du Jour* (reissued by Persephone, £10), leave our current authors standing open-mouthed by their over-photographed blocks. Subscribers will quite possibly have Prospect Books' version of *Plats du Jour*, which went out-of-print some years ago. It seemed to me that the cause of Patience Gray was better served in this new guise than reprinting the old, for Persephone reaches a reading public currently innocent of the blandishments of PG. Although Patience herself would say that she didn't want to be read by the masses, I am sure the masses will be better for having read Patience. Another reprint this season is Simon Hopkinson and Lindsey Bareham's *The Prawn Cocktail Years* (Michael Joseph, £25). Same words (good), new photos and new design (not so good). It now looks, in fact, exactly like one of those recipe books adverted to a few lines ago.

For something completely different, I recommend Cindy Pawlcyn's *Big Small Plates* (Ten Speed Press/PG UK, £25). Pawlcyn is the founder of Mustard's Grill in California where you eat tapas-sized portions of relaxed West Coast fusion foods. The recipes are clear, the flavours arresting, the food wildly up-to-date. A must-read for fashion-victims.

Katherine M. D. Dunbabin: *The Roman Banquet: Images of Conviviality*: Cambridge University Press, 2003: ISBN 0521822521: £59.

Matthew Roller: *Dining Posture in Ancient Rome: Bodies, Values, and Status*: Princeton University Press, 2006: ISBN 0691124574: £26.95

I don't say these two books duplicate one another: their aims are quite different. I will say that when you've read both, you'll know enough about Roman tomb reliefs that depict the subject enjoying a meal. There are many such; in fact it was already a typical theme for relief sculpture in ancient Babylonia, Assyria, Persia and Greece.

Dunbabin starts from the imagery (wall paintings as well as sculpture) and traces it chronologically, from the late Roman Republic to the end of the Empire. She puzzles over the variations, but she doesn't know