

BOOK REVIEWS

Our reviewers are usually identified by their initials only. On this occasion, however, we introduce three of them and their full names. Frances Bissell, who will be familiar to many of our readers from her regular column on cookery in *The Times*, wrote such a charming review of Laura Mason's book on sweets (published in *The Times* on Thursday July 16) that we could not resist asking her permission to reprint it in *PPC* – and she very kindly agreed.

If Simon Varey (of the University of California, Los Angeles) had not alerted us to the publication of a new English translation of Platina, the first printed cook book in the world, we might have been unaware of this for a year or two, since the publication took place in the Renaissance Texts Series of the Renaissance Society of America rather than in a series of culinary texts. He not only rendered us this service, but helped us jump over the various hurdles which had to be surmounted in order to purchase a copy; and volunteered to do the review which we now print.

The book by Lynda Brown on organic foods is very definitely a book for practical use in organising one's food supplies. So we asked Francesca Hyman, a second year student of environmental studies, who was already interested in buying organic foods, to appraise the book from this point of view.

Laura Mason: *Sugar-Plums and Sherbet*: Prospect Books, Totnes, Devon, 1998: ISBN 0907 325 831: 250 pp, b/w illustrations, notes and references, bibliography, index, h/b, £20.00.

Combining a rare and felicitous blend of rigorous scholarship, social history and unashamed nostalgia, Laura Mason has produced a book which will delight everyone who has ever hesitated at a sweet-shop counter, trying to decide between liquorice allsorts and dolly mixtures, aniseed balls and barley sugar.

For me, the book has particular resonances. Like Laura Mason, I was brought up in a village in the West Riding of Yorkshire, and now, at last some of those childhood mysteries are revealed. I now know what makes 'kali' fizz (pronounced, for those brought up south of Watford, 'kale-eye'), how the red letters get into sticks of seaside rock, and why we called liquorice 'Spanish'. I am reminded of things I had quite forgotten, sherbet flying saucers, lucky packets and liquorice comfits, that in West Yorkshire dialect sweets are 'spice', and that toffee used to be sold from large trays in the village shop around Bonfire Night, to be broken and prised out with a toffee hammer. This was, according to Mason, a probable descendant of special foods made and sold around All Souls' Day.

Chapters on different types of sweets and their origins, from sugar candy, fruit drops and comfits to elaborate sugar paste, marshmallow and toffee are each followed by a handful of useful recipes. But this is not a recipe book. It is a detailed and fascinating account of the British love for confectionery, or of our addiction to sugar, depending on your viewpoint. The book begins with chapters on the history of sugar production and refining, and shows how it is interwoven with our own political and commercial history. The earliest works on the subject, from the beginning of the 16th century, show that sugar-work was the province of the apothecary and even the alchemist. As its properties were better understood, sugar began to be exploited far beyond the apothecary's laboratory. From these medieval beginnings, Laura Mason describes the development of confectionery in relation to status. Sugar was expensive, the confectioner a skilled and sought-after craftsman. Or woman, for some of the early professional confectioners were women, such as the 17th-century Mrs Mary Eales. And confectionery became an accepted task of the English gentlewoman in her home, creating intricate conceits for her friends.

We learn, too, of the influence of Italian and French confectioners, through their writings, and their presence in English kitchens, especially after the French Revolution. It is probable that the French are partially responsible for our confusion over the words 'dessert', 'sweet' and 'pudding'. Dessert is what used to be put on the table after the main course had been cleared, or '*desservi*', small sweetmeats, fruit, dried fruit, sugar-coated spices. The influence of French confectioners in the 18th century led to the dessert becoming more elaborate, with creams, jellies and compotes of fruit, and pyramids of coloured sweetmeats. Later, the Americans added to the confusion by including tarts, pies and sweet puddings in the range of food served at dessert. Pudding is a 19th-century description of the sweet course. In the sense that the pudding started life as a savoury mixture, boiled in a pig's gut, that usage is even less appropriate.

This is a most enjoyable, and unusual, book – scholarly but far from dry, revealing an important, although some might argue minor, strand of our cultural history. The text is interspersed with attractive contemporary engravings, from what is clearly a rich archive. And the bonus is that you too can learn how to make barley sugar twists, Edinburgh Rock and Everton Toffee.

F.B.