

## BOOK REVIEWS

Exigencies of space dictate that there are no in-house reviews in this issue, expect a bumper the next. We are very grateful, however, to those who have contributed their views of past or current reading: two, indeed, on the same series, affording us the luxury of stereoscope. Rachel Laudan's message got lost in electronic ether so antedates by some months Professor Anderson's generous communication.

In the last year the National Council for Culture (the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura) has initiated a three-pronged publishing programme of such interest (especially given the similar Euroterroirs project) that I thought even those who do not read Spanish would want to know of its existence. The first series of books, *La Colección Cocina Indígena y Popular* deals, as the title suggests, with indigenous and popular cooking, the last term being a polite way of referring to the lower economic strata of society. It consists of a series of volumes (thirty thus far and more in preparation) each consisting of a long and usually readable study of the cooking of a particular group (nahuatl in the state of Morelos, afro-mestizos in Veracruz, mayas in the Yucatan) or a particular topic (the sweets of Puebla, the fish and seafood of Sonora or the iguanas of Colima, lenten food in Veracruz). This is followed by extensive footnotes and bibliographies and, yes, recipes. Iguanas, I discover, are cooked in all the ways other meats might be: in sauces of chile, mustard, achiote, peanuts, almonds or pumpkin seeds, filleted and fried in a fluffy egg batter, stewed, put in tamales and tacos, and soups. I don't see iguanas in my kitchen any time soon, but I was delighted to discover that one volume is dedicated to *xoconstles*. This is a sour fruit of one of the many kinds of nopal cactus cherished in the region in which I live, the central highlands of the country. I have already learnt to cook them down to a sour sauce for the fattier cuts of pork and to simmer them with onion and tomato in a sour soup, and cheerfully anticipate extending my repertoire of this, a souring agent to rival lemon and tamarind.

The second series of books (and the least satisfactory of the three) moves up to the very different world of middle-class cooking. Called Family Cooking (*La Cocina Familiar*), it is actually a reprinting of a series of 32 volumes (one for every state of Mexico) first published between 1985 and 1988 by the Banco de Crédito Rural (why this bank should have surveyed largely urban cooking is not clear). Each is a straightforward cookbook that gives typical recipes for the state, collected from contributors (though why they were chosen or what their

claims to particular authenticity for the state in question are concerned is another small mystery). Much as more detail would satisfy my historical instincts, my culinary ones are quite satisfied with this cooking of the provincial housewife, carefully composed dishes that waste nothing and yet achieve a level of elegance. For my state, Guanajuato, for example, avocado soups, frog legs in a light chile sauce, chicken in almond sauce, and strawberry charlotte are all appealing.

The third series is the Collection of Historic Recipe Books (*Colección Recetarios Antiguos*), a series of reprints (though not facsimiles) of manuscript and published cookbooks from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the antecedents of that family cooking. I was especially delighted to have my own copy of the foundational Mexican Cook (*El Cocinero Mexicano*) published in 1831 in the wake of independence from Spain, close to a thousand pages dealing with everything from soup to ice creams, sorbets and liqueurs. Also fascinating because so unusual is the Cookery Book of Brother Gerónimo de San Pelayo, (*Libro de Cocina del Hermano Fray Gerónimo de San Pelayo*), very much the working manual of an eighteenth-century Franciscan, with its multitude of vegetable recipes, its menus for the different festival days, and its sophisticated meat dishes for such occasions, including a choice of Spanish, Italian and French stews.

You might well ask why Mexico has launched such an ambitious project. The short answer is that this is nothing new but a continuation of a tradition that dates back at least to the divisive Mexican Revolution (Civil War) in the early years of the twentieth century. Following this, intellectuals looked for ways to bring the diverse elements of the country together. One answer was to celebrate Mexican food, and from the 1930s it has been both celebrated and studied with great care.

Each of these three series is in paperback. The typesetting is excellent and the paper thick and creamy. The price is an amazing (and clearly not economic) equivalent of one to three pounds sterling per volume depending on size. How do you get hold of these books should you wish to? Good question. The address given at the end of the following notice by E. N. Anderson is the headquarters of CONACULTA. Whether an enquiry would produce a catalogue I am not sure. A visit to the office in the south of Mexico City almost certainly would. In the provinces, I pick up books as and when I find them – in grocery stores, news-stands, travelling book fairs, museum stores, or from the limited number of bookstores. If anyone is really interested, I'd be happy to try to help.

RACHEL LAUDAN, Guanajuato, Mexico