


# BOOK REVIEWS

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*Michele Field*

The initials of the reviewers signify the following: MF, Michele Field ([michelefield@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:michelefield@blueyonder.co.uk)); LC, Lynn Chatterton ([blchatterton@tiscalinet.it](mailto:blchatterton@tiscalinet.it)); GU, George Ujvary ([georgeujvary@olgasfinfoods.com](mailto:georgeujvary@olgasfinfoods.com)).

### **Appetite for Profit**

Michele Simon

Nation Books NYC | 2006 | 392pp  
| US\$15.95

The author is a lawyer whose particular concern is public health – and, in particular, the egregious marketing done by the big American food manufacturers. It is a diatribe but one with very good detail about the hypocrisy (and maybe even the self-delusions) where appetite, crunchiness and ‘calories for value’ are concerned. MF

### **Slow Living**

Wendy Parkins and Geoffrey Craig

Berg | 2006 | 180pp | £16.99

Two New Zealand academics get a bit over-serious about ‘slowness’. However, Chapter 5, ‘Food and Pleasure’, looks at what it is about our kitchen habits and mealtimes that makes them ‘slow’ in a good sense. Eating communally? Cooking at low temperatures? Finding foods that are ‘self-affirming’? Eating the simple things that villagers eat? There are clearly some interesting contradictions. MF

### **The Food Industry: Diet, Physical Activity and Health**

Tim Lang, G. Rayner, E. Kaelin  
City University London | 2006 |  
80pp | free as a pdf – begin with  
[www.city.ac.uk](http://www.city.ac.uk)

A diet of remarkable statistics about how 25 big food-related corporations handle questions of the public's 'well being' and their products. Only 6 companies had policies on specifically on children; only 4 gave support to voluntary codes; only 2 were acting on 'portion size'. Companies often spend more promoting the issues than they spend on research to resolve them. A blistering read. MF

### **Plan B 2.0 – Rescuing a Planet under Stress and a Civilisation in Trouble**

Lester R. Brown  
Earth Policy Institute | 2006 |  
365pp | £10.99

This highly regarded thinker was the man who first drew attention to how falling water tables would create a food crisis. In this book he argues that the growing of biofuel crops creates a food crisis in another way. Chapter 9 'Feeding Seven Billion Well' is ammunition for every dinner-party conversation you've imagined on this subject. MF

### **Recipe for a Greener Curry**

Zeenat Anjari  
London Food Link | 2007 | 128pp  
| £10 on paper or free as [www.sustainweb.org/pdf/greener\\_curry.pdf](http://www.sustainweb.org/pdf/greener_curry.pdf)

A cautious criticism, but it points out that most of the 'ethnic' cooking in the West is based on cultures that are fundamentally 'ecological'. The supply chains are poor, and lychees flown into London are bought guiltily by us all. (There is now a lychee variant that comes by sea, but the market does not yet advertise the latter and its virtue.) MF

### **Working the Plate: the Art of Food Presentation**

Christopher Style  
Wiley | 2006 | 200pp | £29.99  
Cookery books usually expect the reader to grasp the 'presentation' from a picture – but this almost-silly but endearing book teaches home-cooks where to dribble the sauce, how to paint balloons with chocolate (burst them and, voila!, a chocolate bowl) and – my favorite – how to shape your rice pudding into quenelles. These pages may be where Martha Stewart starts – so you might as well start here too. MF

**Fat Politics: the Real Story Behind America's Obesity Epidemic**

J. Eric Oliver

Oxford University Press | 2006 | 228pp | £8

A political scientist writes about the public scrutiny of obesity, and his level-headedness is admirable. Obesity arguments are now running roughshod over cooks' experiences and the lessons of food history, so maybe this helps us to understand the political and social sway behind current debates. MF

**Real Food: What to Eat and Why**

Nina Planck

Bloomsbury USA | 2006 | 343pp | US\$23.95

The author is an American who owns the business called 'London Food Markets' and can claim full credit for her reforms of British food-shopping. She is a champion of whole milk, 'real fats', cheeses and an appetite that has rural roots. Intelligent writing about cholesterol is almost unheard-of. If you are a cook and into 'food correctness', start here – not with the BBC. MF

**The Truth About Organic Foods**

Alex A. Avery

Henderson Publications | 2006 | 230pp | US\$19.95

American scientists often write very sceptically about the organic 'movement' (yes, most regard it as a 'movement'). However, if you also nurse some doubts about the pieties of the organic creed, this is an excellent evidence-based survey that sifts out interesting arguments. Read the website [www.TheTruthAboutOrganicFoods.org](http://www.TheTruthAboutOrganicFoods.org). MF

**Market Day in Provence**

Michele de la Pradelle

University of Chicago | 2006 | 266pp | £22.50

The French original was published ten years ago – an appropriate pace of translation for a book where the title of the third chapter is 'The Art of Taking One's Time'. Questions of product provenance and definitions of 'freshness' are endemic to small French markets, as they are elsewhere, but the French seem to have learned to discuss them without pulling faces of 'Shock! Horror!'. MF

### **The Meaning of the 21st Century**

James Martin

Transworld | 2006 | 431pp | £20

This philosopher of future technology puts food in sharp focus. 'The Giant in the Kitchen' is his title for everything ranging from unproductive soil to the growth of 'artificialism'. Deep thoughts about shallow practices, and they are being explored at the 'James Martin 21st-Century School' within Oxford University. MF

### **Cradle of Flavour: Home Cooking from the Spice Islands of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore**

James Oseland

Norton | 2006 | 384pp | £ 22

The author is the new editor of *Saveur* magazine. He has spent 20 years delving below too-much-recycled Indonesian recipes like peanut-butter-glued meat – and has a talent for explaining what truly matters in these kitchens. Most Asian cookbooks provide crass shortcuts and this one doesn't. The narrative gives you confidence in the veracity of the recipes. MF

### **Feeding the Gods: Memories of Food and Culture in Bengal**

Chitrita Banerji

Seagull | 2006 | 134pp | £14.99

Banerji is the next generation beyond Madhur Jaffrey, keen to emphasize in her food narratives what the West can't possibly grasp in the distinctions that Indians make. An engaging book that will rock you on your heels if you've not thought about the difference between West Bengali and East Bengali (Bangladesh) palates. MF

### **X-treme Eating**

Jayne Hurley and Bonnie Liebman

-in Nutrition Action, Centre for Science in the Public Interest |

March 2007 | pp13-15 | [http://www.cspinet.org/nah/03\\_07/xtreme.pdf](http://www.cspinet.org/nah/03_07/xtreme.pdf)

Culinary corruptions often start in restaurants, and this short study looks at calorific American 'temptations' where two dishes are fused, like the cheesecake with a brownie middle layer, or the bacon-cheeseburger pizza. I also learned that 'portions' have been re-phrased: for the ice-cream chain Cold Stone 'Gotta have it' is large, 'Love it' (medium) and 'Like it' (small). MF

### **England in Particular**

Sue Clifford and Angela King

Common Ground/Hodder & Stoughton |

2006 | 512pp | £30

'Placeness' and food is more complicated than you'd think, given the new eco-arguments for buying 'local'. What breed of sheep is your 'local' sheep? – and is that the strain you want to eat or not? About 40 entries in this book deal with authentic foods within the context of all the traditions that aren't so 'lost' after all. MF

### **Dirt: The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth**

William Bryant Logan

Norton | 2007 | 202pp | £9.99

Why do foodies know so little about dirt? – it is certainly not like having to know the chemistry of sea-water if you like shellfish. These beautiful essays, out of

print since they were published in 1995, are a way to engage with the poetry and science of soil, on which plants and our food-choices ultimately depend. MF

### **One Continuous Picnic**

Michael Symons

Melbourne University Press | 2007 | 368pp | £15.50

A kaleidoscopic vision of the long battle in Australia between lovers of real food and the businessmen, scientists and government officials who complicitly entrenched factory food in Australian homes. One can argue enjoyably over the theory that Australia had no peasant culture to resist this. It is a cracker of a book with a warning about our vulnerability to commercial influence – as relevant in this new edition as when it was written in 1984. LC

### **Home Cooking in the Global Village: Caribbean Food from Buccaneers to Ecotourists**

Richard Wilk

Berg | 2006 | 286pp | £17.99

This American anthropologist knows the small country of Belize inside-out – one of the most 'globalized' places on earth where 'local' has long been 'colonial' too. The illusion that there is a true cuisine, 'natural' to a place – despite what the Slow Food lobby says – is gently demolished. Rightly, in an economic sense, Belize village-shops stock frozen meat labeled 'Buy Belizean'. MF

### **Cool Tools: Cooking Utensils from the Japanese Kitchen**

Kate Klippenstein

Kodansha | 2006 | 112pp | £16

An American food writer married to a Japanese photographer simply walk the reader through the best of ordinary things in Japanese kitchens. If 'The Shops' cited at the end of this seductive book were not all Japanese (though some with English websites), our cooking techniques might change overnight. If you can talk about what kind of handles pots should have, or different steaming techniques, this is 'meet your match'. MF

### **Piano, Piano, Pieno: Slow Food from a Tuscan Farm**

Susan McKenna-Grant

HarperCollins Canada | 2006 | 435pp | US\$24.95

Yet another paen about Italian food, this time from a Canadian farmer and cook who is living the Tuscan dream and doing B&B for her fortunate guests. Good Italian recipes but the descriptions of 'simple' bread making are too daunting for the home cook. I quailed at the need to put on elbow-length oven-gloves and stand well back before opening and spraying the oven. LC

### **Hugh Fearlessly Eats It All**

Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall  
Bloomsbury | 2006 | 288pp | £15.99

A collection of writings from twenty odd years, to keep 'Hairy-Hugh' fans happy. Whether its brain curry or the in's and out's of dunking biscuits, Hugh's witty and conscientious views will have all of us searching for our own little patch of food nirvana. GU

### **'Geographic Distribution of CAP Subsidies in the Netherlands'**

T. Hermans, H. Naeff & I. Terluin  
Alterra Report 1385, Netherlands |

2007 | see [www.farmsubsidy.org](http://www.farmsubsidy.org)  
Behind this arcane title is currently the best food-industry story anywhere. Two Danish journalists and Jack Thurston in London (not to be confused with the Dutch authors of the Report above, but their encouragers) set about challenging the official non-disclosure regarding who exactly receives the EU's annual CAP pot of gold (55 billion euros). Mis-spending on education, hospitals and 'homeland security' is nothing compared to the mishandled money in this area, and in March these farming policy heroes won an international prize for Investigative Journalism. MF

**Kaiseki: The Exquisite  
Cuisine of Kyoto's Kikunoi  
Restaurant**

Yoshinori Murata

Kadansha | 2006 | 191pp | £24.99

The Japanese gave us the philosophy of 'eating with one's eyes' and this book explains what we might see if we experience an April meal in this Kyoto restaurant. The author is devoted to 'seasonality' far beyond our definitions. Maybe half of the recipes you could execute (though you could never find the plates and pots to show them off as Murata does). MF

**Environmental Impacts  
of Food Production and  
Consumption**

Kenneth Green and Defra

Defra | 2006 | 198pp

The UK government commissioned this report from the Manchester Business School guru Ken Green, to look at the published evidence for and against means of food production as they touch the environment. It is largely encouraging, saying that no great damage is being done by doing the farming we are doing, and that the organics lobby's claims are often unreliable. Chase this as a pdf – Defra is not releasing paper copies. MF

**The Banquet: Dining in  
the Great Courts of Late  
Renaissance Europe**

Ken Alcala

University of Illinois | 2007 | 223pp

| £22.99

Maybe this won't be surpassed as the Food History Title of 2007. It explains the past not only in terms of 'how they cooked' and 'what', but basically why. For example, what foods were acceptable as ingredients but not foods to be seen to be eating, like onions (the trans fats of the time). The Renaissance deserves this sympathetic scholar. MF

**Carve-ups: the Rudest Food  
Reviews**

Michelle Lovric

Mamelok, Bury St Edmunds |

2007 | 95pp | £8.99

Food-quote books spread like mint plants, but this one I enjoyed because the author has collected snide remarks from her private reading, seemingly without Google's help. Giles Coran describing a fish pate: 'as close as a man should get to sucking a fishmonger's insole'. On the same subject (feet) Groucho Marx: 'I tried boiling pig's feet once but I couldn't get the pig to stand still'. (Okay, the second was googled.). MF

**Baking Boot Camp: Five Days of Basic Training at the Culinary Institute of America**

Darra Goldstein

Wiley | 2007 | 276pp | £19.99

Darra is the generous spirit behind the food magazine *Gastronomica* and here, in witty writing, she has ‘submitted’ herself to two courses in baking and in desserts, during which she questions her competence (and sometimes others’). It is a *Pilgrim’s Progress* of food techniques, but should the rest of us suffer this much when we can already do 80% of puff pastry? One senses that Darra was a convert to perfection. MF

**A Taste of Persia: An Introduction to Persian Cooking**

Najmieh K. Batmanglij

I. B. Tauris | 2007 | 176pp | £16.99

When this 1999 title went out of print its loss was lamented. The author is a very sensible Iranian food historian who understands that of all sophisticated cuisines today, the ‘Persian’ perhaps remains the most foreign to us. I worked backwards from the sweets: chickpea cookies first, and then rice dishes, one with tart cherries and another, rice with orange peel. MF

**Food is Culture**

Massimo Montanari

Columbia University Press | 2006 | 140pp | £14.50

The author is an Italian anthropologist whose generalizations gave me a sinking, ‘heard it before’ feeling. But his sharp illustrations of arguments are unusual. He starts from a low goal-bar on the point that ‘taste’ is part of society, but he kicks the detail with a very sure toe. MF

## REVIEW ARTICLES

Joan Thirsk, *Food in Early Modern England*, Hambledon Continuum, London, 2007, 396 pp., £30

Food history has long suffered, and benefited, from being a relatively recent area of serious study. Suffered in that those with experience in many other fields have tackled food history piecemeal from their own viewpoints – as chefs and cooks, bibliophiles, nutritionists, chemists, social historians and anthropologists, rarely painting the whole picture of food in the past. Conversely, this multiplicity of talents has benefited food history by preventing too narrow a focus on the subject. Not yet (thank goodness) a fully-fledged academic subject, food history is not confined within the high and rigid walls of an accepted syllabus.

The book is structured thus: the first part of the book ‘sets food within the context of a changing economic, social, political and religious world’ subdividing the period into roughly 50-year periods (excepting the Civil War and Interregnum) beginning with a scene-setting chapter on food before 1500. Six further chronological chapters take us up to 1760, usually in roughly 50-year periods. Within many of these chapters are sections on cookery books, scientific writers, evidence from household accounts and food of the poor. The second part is thematic; an additional chapter on regional and social patterns of diet is followed by a closer look at some individual foods ‘in order to pull together facts that have been scattered in the first part’. This structure works well but there is inevitably some duplication between the chronological and thematic sections.

Joan Thirsk is an agricultural historian (many would say the pre-eminent historian of English agriculture alive today) and this is reflected in her approach to Early Modern food. Farming, gardening, and fishing were the major determinants of the amount and variety of food available and so they underpin both the national and regional food picture. It is evident right from the first chapter that a wealth of knowledge of agricultural history and farming regions underpins the book. So, for instance, we are provided with a detailed analysis of the periodic shortages of food occasioned by bad harvests in the first 30 years of the seventeenth century and the differing degrees of shortages in various regions as a background to this chapter. This recurring dearth is also the backdrop to a number of health and diet books

of the period which she explores. And her agricultural history covers not only broad themes – at the micro level we read of the enterprising villagers of Over near Cambridge who developed a large-scale dairying enterprise at the end of the seventeenth century with almost 1000 milch cows: ‘The inhabitants contrived to buy in cows at Michaelmas so that they were able to supply cows calving every month through the winter: thus, they were able to supply almost as much butter in the winter as in the summer to the university dons’.

This book is also firmly rooted in general political and social history – Chapter 5 covers only 20 years in order to tackle the peculiar problems of the Civil War and Interregnum period, a time when needs of both armies and civilians placed strain on food production. Armies needed easily portable foods and butter and cheese were in particular demand. The war also spread the popularity of cider and perry when troops marched through the West Country and took to these drinks. Another foodstuff ‘bisket’ moved from army fare onto polite tables in the same period. After the war, idealistic writers, co-ordinated by the editor and journalist Samuel Hartlib, produced imaginative ideas on improvements to England’s food.

The author has made good use of a very wide range of evidence. Household accounts are carefully scrutinized, like those of the Shuttleworths (Lancashire landowners in late sixteenth century), noting the personal preferences of individual families and also the regional foods and changes of fashion that these documents reveal. The Shuttleworths purchased artichoke slips in 1592 for their kitchen garden, maybe as a result of eating this vegetable for the first time and wanting more. We are given the backgrounds of many of the authors consulted, where they lived, their social status, and how their personal views might distort the information they provide. Important sources are milked for information. Over 10 pages Joan Thirsk extracts with great skill all the subtle changes in food fashions contained in John Parkinson’s monumental herbal, *Paradisi in Sole* of 1629, such as gentry preference for globe artichokes over the Jerusalem variety, or the fashion for cauliflowers, pickled gillyflowers, and red beets. She follows Parkinson through his own and others’ London gardens, encountering such novelties as the sweet parsley which grew in the Italian ambassador’s garden and the new varieties of vegetables introduced by Dutch immigrants.

Food history is often a story of individuals and the movement of ideas between them and we are provided with many such instances. German

miners in the North of England were supplied with fresh oranges in 1550s and soon afterwards some northern gentry developed a taste for them. Gentry travelling abroad brought back foreign tastes, like a growing use of olive oil in second half of the sixteenth century. Piecing together of scraps of information about pheasant breeding in the 1530s reveals the probable origin of a fashion for such birds on the tables of the rich – Henry VIII's visit to France in November 1532 and the subsequent employment of a French priest at Eltham Palace to breed pheasants. And the predilection of Henry and some of his queens for delicate fruits and salads helped to popularize these foods. (It is not many years ago that I read of a preposterous claim in a new book about Henry that he suffered from scurvy through lack of fresh vegetables – a claim based on the absence of bought-in vegetables in the surviving kitchen accounts. Joan Thirsk has put paid to that canard, noting the succession of gifts of such fare by rich and poor to the King, as well as the produce of his own gardens.)

Leonard Welsted's poem in lavish praise of a new style apple turnover, published by William Ellis in 1750, is linked with a lighter style of pastry described by one of Richard Bradley's correspondents. (The apple turnover, 'pocket-food for farm labourers in the fields, was, when well made with light pastry and a clove or two for seasoning, a far cry from the bland and stodgy food some historians have thought normal fare for the poor.)

The author complains in her conclusion that food history 'is a slippery subject that resists the historian's urge to generalize' but despite this she has succeeded in identifying many trends in this period, some previously underemphasized and some newly discovered. Take for instance the interest of many thoughtful writers in a vegetable-rich diet to improve health particularly in the second half of the seventeenth century. A number of sources are cited to identify the move in the eighteenth century from preserving meat by salting and smoking it to pickling it in brine-improving both the taste and keeping qualities. More generally the author ponders the role food preservation in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries played in maximizing the availability of food at a time of rising population. An important trend which may well provoke further research is the increasing consumption of peas and beans in the century or so to 1760. Pulses were enthusiastically promoted by members of the Hartlib circle for the poor and gradually gained acceptance at better-off tables. Evidence of more field cultivation in the eighteenth century confirms the

trend, pulses providing both bulk and protein for many, amounting to 'an incipient pulse revolution that was cut short by the arrival of potatoes'.

Joan Thirsk rightly emphasizes the role of women in early modern food history. Most households, rich and poor had women cooks and so women had a major say in meals put on the table. Poor (i.e. ordinary) women feature prominently as bearers of gifts of fruit, vegetables, nuts and poultry to Henry VIII – showing that these 'minor' foods were often produced by women and she notes that a number of women supplied small amounts of butter, cream, eggs and milk for a feast in Oxford in 1570. There was a general tendency for women to start small-scale food businesses which, if business expanded, such as the butter trade in sixteenth century London, men took over.

Following the chronological chapters is a section on regional and social patterns of diet with seven studies of areas of England. The section on Cornwall shows that, despite the view of some contemporaries that this was a county with a meagre diet, its foods were in fact diverse. The long coastline and deep estuaries yielded abundant fish as well as samphire and edible seaweeds. Oats were for many ordinary Cornishmen and women a healthy bread grain. Pigs provided meat, as did wild birds, domestic fowl and goats. White meats came from cow keeping, even small cottages had orchards attached and well flavoured wild herbs were gathered. Mysterious seeds and beans were washed ashore from foreign ships and some were successfully cultivated in the mild Cornish climate.

The introduction to social patterns of diet remarks on the noticeable increase in gentry households in the countryside in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century and demonstrates the effect of a new household on an area where hitherto only more modest families had been living. Orchards, vegetable and herb gardens, new types of livestock and fish ponds appeared. Servants were hired; some learned to cook new dishes for the gentry others merely observed the new food ways. Those recruited to the gardens learned new techniques and acquired cuttings and seeds for their own gardens. 'An exchange of knowledge and skill was in progress between the classes that made everyone familiar with new foods and tastes.'

The final section delves deeper into the history of the major foods of the time, covering bread, animal and bird meat, fish, vegetables and herbs, fruit, drinks and condiments. These subchapters give an opportunity to trace major changes in the consumption of these foods, including, in the case of

vegetables, the continuing link in many learned minds between vegetables and health and the decline in fresh vegetable consumption as industrialization took hold in the later eighteenth century. The author is sceptical about contemporary views that the English were exceptional meat eaters- a view based largely on London eating patterns, and she reminds us that some meats were ubiquitous but have not been much noticed by historians, like rabbits from which many warreners made a great deal of money.

This book is a skilful blend of the food choices of individuals and broad changes in the history of England's food in the Early Modern period. Joan Thirsk remarks in her introduction that her task could better have been tackled by ten people but I doubt whether a committee of ten would have produced such a readable book. Ten (or more) historians may be inspired to follow up the new themes identified here for further research.

My only criticisms are of the book's physical appearance. Some of the black and white illustrations have not reproduced well and, in an effort to squeeze too many words onto each page, the publisher has narrowed the margins resulting in a cramped layout which does not please the eye.

MALCOLM THICK

Silvestre Silva and Helena Tassara, *Fruit Brazil Fruit*: Impresa das Artes, Sao Paulo, 2005. ISBN 85-89138-25-9; 322 pp.; fully illustrated (photographs); no index, but an alphabetical table of contents; bibliography; approx. 40 €. The book was bought due to a delayed flight from Sao Paulo to Madrid. After quickly browsing through it, I knew that it had to be bought, despite the fact that Bayer Crop Science seems to have sponsored it. A book describing fruits and nuts growing in Brazil, native or immigrants, from A for Avocado to W for Watermelon. These first and last fruits may make it appear that the catalogue is filled with common-or-garden stuff, but some other examples from approximately 110 different entries – for example, Cupuaçu, Guariroba, Bacuripari, Jatoba and Pequi – show that there is more to explore. One can be sure that this book brings something new for you.

Each entry is provided with good photo(s) of fruit and plant, together with information panels under the headings: Scientific name, Plant family, Origin, Plant description, Fruiting season and Propagation. The main article to each entry gives a lot of historical, cultural, economic and culinary background information for each fruit. The book ends with summary

descriptions of some variety-rich plant families such as *Annoceae*, *Mirtaceae*, *Palmaceae* (palm tree family) and *Passifloraceae* (passion flower fruit). Whoever likes fruit and is curious, is highly recommended to seek this book out.

REINHARD MADLINGER

Helen Saberi: *I remember Mama (and Dad)*; privately published, Excellent Press, Ludlow, 2005.

This elegant little book of recipes was compiled by Helen Saberi as a memorial to her mother, a celebration in food of a happy life, an offering to distribute to friends and relatives at her funeral. It evokes pleasant memories of Yorkshire baking days. I was brought up in Cawood, a village on the flat Plain of York, not far from Poppleton, where Helen spent her childhood. I was six years-old on the day war broke out, the day before Helen's parents got married, so there is a generation gap here, bridged effortlessly by memories of the things we had to eat. These memories go even further back, to another Yorkshire village, Bradshaw, up the hill from Halifax, sprawling over the bleak moors that stretched towards Hawarth, Bronte country, where my paternal grandmother, Sarah Elizabeth Riley, brought up a large family on the meagre wages of her husband Willie, under-appreciated employee of Tetley's worsted mill, now demolished. A far cry from York City Police where Helen's father worked. But in spite of the distances in time, space and social class, the wholesome food prepared by my mum Millicent, Helen's mum Hilda, and Sarah Elizabeth was typical of a three generations of good plain Yorkshire cooking. In those days there was a stigma attached to 'shop cakes', the expensive and unwholesome fall-back position of sluts and slatterns. Consequently I have yet to outgrow my childhood envy of ladies in hats eating ethereal cream cakes in Betty's, the renowned York teashop, for many of our home-baked offerings were a carbohydrate-laden substitute for central heating, frugal solid worth rather than extravagant frivolity. Granny's bread and dripping and slabs of parkin, her currant tea cakes and flapjacks, were edible radiators, to last the whole chill week after the heat of the of the great iron kitchen range had died down. Treacle tart, curd tart, lemon cheese tart, all in a robust lard-based pastry, sustained us in our hungry youth. Helen's mum's cakes and buns were lighter – fairy cakes, melting moments and Victoria sandwich cake, but they too were the product of the ritual baking day, when the heat of the oven was made the most of by careful housewives, who did a

week's baking in one long day, when fuel shortages and rationing were still uncomfortable memories.

Saberi is an accomplished cook and food writer; she tells it the way it was, without sentimentality or substitutions. No messing about with *beurre doux* or bourbon vanilla pods and designer chocolate, these recipes use the ingredients of the time, margarine or lard, vanilla essence and cocoa, described with warmth, honesty and affection. The final recipe might well have been called the love that dare not speak its name, for it is the adored archetypal trifle of our youth, the recipe that Helen did not put in her authoritative work on trifles 'for fear of reprisals', and here it is in all its glory, complete with Bird's custard and tinned fruit wallowing in Rowntree's raspberry jelly, smothered in whipped cream decorated with glacé cherries, angelica and little silver balls.

This little book is a treasure trove of honest and perceptive memories. Copies can be had from Helen on receipt of postage. (Contact Helen Saberi <helen@asaberi.freereserve.co.uk>.

GILLIAN RILEY

Martin Jones; *Feast. Why Humans Share Food*: Oxford University Press, 2007, 364 pp., hardback, £20.

In an elegant essay, the Italian medieval historian Massimo Montanari places food at the centre of human experience. 'Food is culture,' he proclaims, our ways of eating mark us out. The point is made at greater length by the Cambridge archaeologist Martin Jones. If the Italian cooks a snack, the Cambridge offer is dinner at high table. That crude analogy should not be mistaken. The best of snacks is a meal in microcosm. *Feast*, by contrast, offers so many goodies the reader might die of surfeit.

Food may be the headline subject, but nothing less than the history of mankind will satisfy Martin Jones in his accounting for our habits at table. By trade he is an archaeologist, but not as we have known it. While the mad professors of our imagination used once to dig up pots and pans, or hoards of coins and shimmering artefacts, today their work revolves around the almost forensic analysis of bones, plant remains and residues. It is breathtaking what they can learn from these investigations, whether the vegetation current at one point in time, the ambient temperature over millennia, the likely diet of any creature (whether a human, or indeed his prey whose bones were discarded at the fireside), the nutritional and

medical history of any subject careless enough to leave his or her skeleton lying about and much, much more. He tells the story of the excavation of a Homeric palace on the southern coast of Greece in the 1950s. It was spectacular, the diggers recovered early written archives, endless pottery and impressive built remains. But they ignored the bones, the leavings of the butchers. Fifty years later (they had been provident enough to bag them, not discard them), the bio-archaeologists set to work with electronic microscopes and atomic scales. They yielded information as valuable as any from the earlier dig: just as their analysis of the tiny food and drink residues in the pottery itself produced hard evidence of the ancient Greeks cooking up the most potent of brews. This is as enthralling as Patricia Cornwell, without the gratuitous gore.

He picks a dozen archaeological sites from Europe and the Middle East (with an extracurricular foray to the Gombe National Park in Tanzania to look at the chimpanzees) as milestones in our progress to the contemporary world. I say 'our', but two of his earliest, in Britain and in Spain, relate not to *Homo sapiens* but the precursor species Heidelberg man and Neanderthals. In each chapter, a reconstructive fictional narrative serves as preface to an exposition of why and how he told the story the way he did. Many of the sites (how archaeologists love disaster) were submerged by catastrophe (fire, flood, tempest), thus preserving a single episode as if in a specimen jar. The narrative superstructure he can build upon the smallest scraps of matter is quite remarkable. Of course, who is to say that his own investigations will not be superseded at some future date by yet more sophisticated techniques? Not all is hypothesis, but speculation is never far distant from the core of truth.

Food is the business however, and how man came to treat it so differently from the rest of the natural world. We share our food; we eat it in public; we make eye-contact with strangers while stuffing ourselves; we sit round a hearth; we have likes and dislikes and use those preferences to mark group affiliation: all habits peculiar to humans (and sometimes apes). It takes a lot of archaeology to explain this, but Jones is never abashed. What is enlivening about his account is how he soars from the micro to the macro, from a discussion of pollen in peat bogs to the tempo of climate change over thousands of years.

He places his human subjects, too, in an ecological network of 'food webs' that vary massively over time as they develop from broad-based

hunter-gathering strategies that took in everything from big game to wild seeds to an eventual narrowing of our dietary choices to those which can be serviced by settled agriculture. An evolutionary parallel to this process is drawn in his tale of the emergence of the big brain. We, as we know and celebrate, have very big brains. This capital evolutionary gain comes at a certain cost. First off, our gut reduced in size and complexity to compensate for the over-development at the top end of our bodies (hence we were less able to digest all the cellulose and woody stuff that cows and ruminants make short work of); and secondly we, and our mothers, needed extra nutrition to give ourselves a head-start. This had a galvanic impact on our eating strategies, putting an emphasis on group cooperation on the one hand, while limiting to a degree the sort of foods we once knew and loved.

As in any study of big food, agriculture is a central concern. What was the impetus that caused us to move from a nutritionally (and medically) sound hunter-gathering strategy to domesticated beasts and domesticated plants in fields around fixed settlements? As he is at pains to observe, agricultural humans were of smaller stature and in worse health than their foraging ancestors. The only obvious evolutionary gain was an increase in population growth (but this impacted pretty seriously on the health and welfare of females). His assessment of the transition from one state to the other leans towards a social and political explanation, rather than one founded on nutritional imperatives. It is refreshing that he is willing to bring into the argument concepts drawn from anthropologists like Lévi-Strauss and Mary Douglas as well as relying on mechanistic and bio-evolutionary theories. Not everything about our food choices was done because it was good for us. Look, he would say, at our overwhelming desire to eat white wheaten bread rather than wholemeal or black rye bread. He is happy to blame Christianity for the preference; I would tend to suggest it was because it tasted better.

(This review was written in the first instance for *The Guardian*.) TJ

Alas there is no space for Notes & Queries so they have to be held over until the next issue.