

A feast of reading

books about food
and beverages,
cooks and cookery



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The 2006 cover theme for the CL was *Books are brain food*, so I thought it a good idea to end off the year with a 'books and food' article. A second reason is that my office now overlooks a rather up-market restaurant and from my window I can see both the outside dining area with people enjoying long, leisurely lunches and the small, rather dark and crowded section with kitchen minions bustling and scurrying about. In this article and the accompanying booklist I am going to concentrate on books with a food theme, readable non-fiction rather than recipe books, although some of the books do include recipes.

There have been a number of books in the last few years with titles like **Salt**, **Vanilla**, **Coffee** and **Rum**. In this context, the name that springs immediately to mind is Mark Kurlansky. He is a talented writer and thorough researcher, and is doing a good job of writing popular books about

unlikely subjects. **Cod: a biography of a fish that changed the world** is an interesting and enlightening account of the part which the Atlantic cod has played in human history. It contains plenty of illustrations and a 40-page appendix of recipes compiled from a wide range of sources. A few recipes are also included in his more wide-ranging book, **Salt: a world history**. In the introduction he writes: 'Salt is so common, so easy to obtain, and so inexpensive that we have forgotten that from the beginning of civilisation until about a 100 years ago, salt was one of the most sought-after commodities in human history.' (p.6.) It was so valuable that it has often been used as currency; wars have been fought over it and early trade routes established to facilitate its commercial distribution. Chef Anthony Bourdain says of the book: '**Salt** is a fascinating, indispensable history of an indispensable ingredient. Like...**Cod**, it's a must-have book for any serious cook or foodie.' Foodies will also enjoy **Choice cuts**, an anthology of food writing selected and edited by Kurlansky. This really is a wonderful collection for the armchair reader;

containing extracts from the writings of a wide range of authors from around the world and throughout history. We have recently ordered his latest book **The big oyster: New York in the world - a molluscular history**. Kurlansky, who is a New Yorker, insists: 'The history of the New York oyster is the history of New York itself.' His books are entertaining and informative, and a good choice for those wanting readable non-fiction for the holiday season.

Bourdain is a New Yorker too and also a writer. While there are numerous books by celebrity chefs around, his are somewhat different. One reviewer described his writing as a sort of punk gourmet. His memoir/exposé of working in restaurant kitchens started off as a magazine article for the **New Yorker**. The title says it all: **Kitchen confidential: adventures in the culinary underbelly**. A reviewer described the book as being about 'the grungier aspects of restaurant life. Drugs, crime, aggression, violence, and sex all commingle with the pots and pans.' (BL 15/6/2000) His most recent book, **The nasty bits**, is a collection of essays about cooking and travelling, largely derived from his television programme. He despises celebrity chefs and considers most food writing pretentious. His own writing is earthy and irreverent, and, although I think he often goes out of his way to shock, enjoyable.

Journalist Bill Buford was founding editor of the respected magazine **Granta** and for many years fiction editor of the **New Yorker**. Now a staff writer, he did a piece for the **New Yorker** on Mario Batali, a flamboyant, fat chef who is well known in America. It was while researching that article that Buford decided he wanted to work in a restaurant kitchen. He recounts his experiences working in Babbo, Batali's famous Manhattan restaurant, in his pacy and amusing book, **Heat: an amateur's adventures as kitchen slave, line cook, pasta-maker, and apprentice to a butcher in Tuscany**.

Another book written by a journalist is **The perfectionist: life and death in haute cuisine**. In it Rudolph Chelminski traces the life of his friend, Burgundy chef Bernard Loiseau, who committed suicide in

2003. It is something of a cautionary tale about the demanding life of a chef, but it is also a history and celebration of modern French cuisine. While not particularly well written, this reads easily and should appeal to anyone interested in French food and cookery.

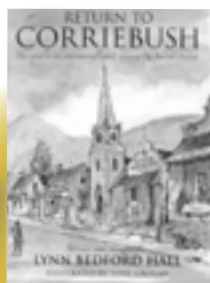
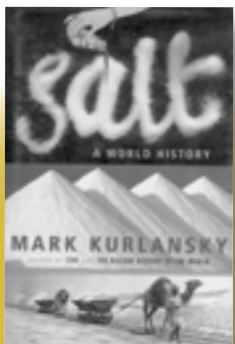
There are many other books similar to Kurlansky's **Salt. Spice: a history of temptation** is Jack Turner's entertaining history of the spice race and the many uses attributed to spices through the ages. Other books concentrate on just a single spice or substance. Two worth mentioning here are Willard's **Secrets of saffron: the vagabond life of the world's most seductive spice** and Ecott's **Vanilla: travels in search of the luscious substance**. I thoroughly enjoyed Giles Milton's **Nathaniel's nutmeg: how one man's courage changed the course of history**. In it he describes how English spice trader Nathaniel Courthope battled from 1616 to 1620 to prevent the Dutch from gaining control over the nutmeg island of Run. 'Using original diaries, journals, letters and obscure Dutch chronicles, Milton spins a fascinating tale of swashbuckling adventure, courage and cruelty, as nations and entrepreneurs fought for a piece of the nutmeg action.' (Time 12/4/99 p.59.) While obviously not written about a spice, **Caviar: the strange history and uncertain future of the world's most coveted delicacy** is worth mentioning here simply because of the author's spicy name, Inga Saffron. She 'has taken an off-beat but intriguing topic, and, through her elegant and detailed prose, created a book worthy of gourmards and amateur historians alike.' (PW 15/10/02.)

A number of books have been written in the last year or so about honey. Holley Bishop was a literary agent in New York before she bought a farmstead in Connecticut and tried her hand at beekeeping. In her book **Robbing the bees: a biography of honey - the sweet gold that seduced the world** she intersperses stories of beekeeping with details of the biology of bees and beehives and the history of honey, particularly focusing on how

people have used products taken from the bees - not only honey, but beeswax and bee venom too. She also includes some recipes using honey. Hattie Ellis's **Sweetness & light** is a 'wide-ranging look at the bee and honey, and the role they have played in human society, past and present' (MJJ) while Ede's **Honey and dust: travels in search of sweetness** was described in the **Daily Mail** as: 'The incredible and heartwarming story of how one man's search for the world's perfect jar of honey saved his sanity.' The author of **The hive: the story of the honeybee and us** is a food critic, historian and research fellow at Cambridge with the apposite name of Bee Wilson. In the **Literary Review** her book was described as 'a very entertaining and charming view of the bee and its extraordinary impact on human culture. A sweet read.'

Other 'sweet reads' are the books about chocolate and Tim Richardson's **Sweets: a history of temptation**. Our reviewer thought it 'well researched but very readable and written in enthusiastic but light-hearted style.' (MJJ.) I do not know if he is any relation but a Paul Richardson has written **Indulgence: around the world in search of chocolate**, an entertaining book which is part travelogue, part history. McFadden's **Chocolate: a celebration of the world's most addictive food** is 'a lovely browse and full of interesting information as well as an excellent array of visual archival material.' (JdeB.) On a less popular level perhaps is Michael and Sophie Coe's **The true history of chocolate**, but it has garnered much praise, being described as a 'superbly written, charming, and surprisingly engrossing chronicle of a food and how its development has touched the lives of cultures around the world' (BL 15/2/96) and even as 'the point of departure for all future studies on chocolate.' (LR 8/96 p.49.)

As far as beverages go, coffee, tea and wine have all had their share of readable non-fiction written about them. Moxham's **Tea: addiction, exploitation and empire** is a fascinating account of the history of tea and the tea trade. Ellis's **The coffee house: a cultural history** is certainly worth reading but it is Antony Wild's **Coffee: a dark history** that I can strongly recommend. The author's knowledge of both coffee (he worked in the coffee industry for many years) and colonial history serves him well here; the book is intelligently written, wide-ranging, thought provoking and readable. Scottish novelist Iain Banks's first work of non-fiction is **Raw spirit: in search of the perfect dram**. About whisky and travelling around Scotland, this should please his many fans. For those interested in spirits there is Coulombe's history of rum, **Rum: the epic story of the drink that conquered the world**, and Calabrese's beautifully-illustrated **Cognac**:



a liquid history. Christy Campbell is the former defence correspondent for the **Daily Telegraph**. His book, **Phylloxera: how wine was saved for the world**, is a surprisingly entertaining and interesting read - a must for wine fundis. **The ripening sun**, Patricia Atkinson's account of her trials and tribulations as well as joys and success with her vineyard and wine-making in the Dordogne, is another enjoyable read.

A food-themed biography that comes highly recommended is **Toast: the story of a boy's hunger** by the award-winning British cookery writer, Nigel Slater. A noticeable publishing trend in the last few years has been the 'memoir with recipes'. There have been so many, but I will mention just a few here. Marlena de Blasi's two books about love and food and life in Italy are both charming reads. A middle-aged writer and chef, she fell in love with and married a Venetian she barely knew. Her departure from America and her life with Fernando in Italy is recounted in **A thousand days in Venice: an unexpected romance** and its sequel **A thousand days in Tuscany: a bittersweet adventure**. Other Italian books in this sub-genre are Patrizia Chen's **Rosemary and bitter oranges: growing up in a Tuscan kitchen** and Mary Contini's **Dear Francesca: an Italian journey of recipes recounted with love**, a delightful book about food, family and their Italian heritage which she wrote for her daughter. French food writer Colette Rossant has written two enjoyable memoirs with recipes. **Apricots on the Nile** is about growing up in Cairo and **Return to Paris** picks up after her return to France in 1947. We have not yet seen the third volume which recounts her experiences as a newly-wed immigrant in New York in the 1960s and 70s.

South Africa has its share of recent memoir-and-recipes titles too. **From the table of my memory** is written by Durban-born Urmila Jithoo who now lives in Cape Town after spending 22 years in America where she worked in a Manhattan gourmet food store. There is also Zuretha Roos's **The saffron pear tree, and other kitchen memories** and **Take 40 fresh crayfish** by Johannesburg-born John Coulton. Eve Palmer's **Return to Camdeboo: a century's Karoo foods and flavours** has been around for some time but for anyone who has not read it there's a delight in store. **Camdeboo Karoo venison** and **West Coast cookbook** are two excellent examples of regional South African cookbooks.

A number of local titles have won international awards recently including the delightful **Fig jam and foxtrot** which won a World

Gourmand Award for Best Cookbook Illustration. Local artist and newspaper cartoonist, Tony Grogan, illustrated both it and its sequel, **Return to Corriebush**. The author, Lynn Bedford Hall, grew up in a small Karoo town where everyone knew everyone else's business. She uses her memories of small-town life and her experience as a food columnist and amateur cook to good effect in both these books where she intersperses recipes with fictional stories about the people in the town of Corriebush. Attractive and entertaining, these are lovely books and would make ideal gifts. Her choice of including a dance and jam in her title obviously harks back to another memorable South African book, **Quadrilles and konfyt**, an account of the life of Cape cookery writer, Hildagonda Duckitt, which also includes her private journal. More about Duckitt and other food writers (including Mrs Beeton and C Louis Leipoldt) can be found in former book selector, Cecily van Gend's *Between the lines* columns in the March/April and May/June 2002 issues of the **CL**. We have recently purchased **The short life & long times of Mrs Beeton**, a biography by Kathryn Hughes, and new editions of some of Leipoldt's books about food and wine. One can learn more about local food and cookery books in a welcome new publication, **Die geskiedenis van Boerekos 1652-1806** by HW Claassens. Being a shortened version of his doctoral thesis, this is a scholarly work unlikely to have wide popular appeal, but I would recommend it to anyone really interested in the history and development of South African cuisine.

I'll end off with a rather expensive book that I liked so much that I bought a copy for myself. Theuns Botha, the regional librarian for Oudtshoorn, was impressed enough to buy it as a gift for his trainee-chef son. **McGee on food & cooking: an encyclopedia of kitchen science, history and culture** is something of a classic, having first been published over 20 years ago. It is a fascinating book to dip into, full of fascinating bits of information.

I hope readers will find something to their taste in the accompanying booklist.

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