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# Acquired Taste: The French Origins of Modern Cooking by T. Sarah Peterson

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T. Sarah Peterson. *Acquired Taste: The French Origins of Modern Cooking*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994. 55 pls. + xiv + 262 pp. \$34.95.

Despite the misleading title, this book has much to offer the Renaissance historian, though the task of picking out the savory morsels will admittedly be difficult. The title more appropriately should be called "The classical origins of seventeenth century French cooking with Renaissance Italy as an intermediary." The author's argument is as follows: Medieval and Arabic cooking was dominated by golden, perfumed, spiced and sugared foods which reflected the alchemical interests of the period. In contrast, Renaissance Italy, particularly the humanists, began to revive taste combinations of classical Greece and Rome, including the "salt-acid" flavor as well as particular foods—mushrooms, oysters, artichokes, salted foods and salads. These new flavors in turn influenced the revolution of modern cooking devised by seventeenth-century French cookbook authors such as La Varenne and Massialot, whose decisive innovation was the development of sauce reduction incorporating the essences of herbs and butter, while excising the sugared and saffroned dishes from the new order of main courses. This story should be familiar to food historians.

It is only in the details that this book falls short of satisfying. In order to illustrate the connection of classical Rome to "modern" taste, we are asked

to accept a number of unpalatable assertions. Primarily, there is the contention that salt was not a universal condiment throughout the Middle Ages, and that somehow salty foods had gone out of fashion. The salty fermented fish sauce of Apicius (*garum*) is thus linked to the anchovy of La Varenne across the centuries, despite the fact that the two were used in entirely different contexts. Nor does the author provide convincing arguments to support a medieval decline of salted foods. Certainly references to stockfish, herrings, hams and sausages abound in the middle ages. A thriving export trade of these products attests to their popularity.

It is true that spices and sugar were the true obsession of Europeans up until the early modern era, but this has more to do with their rarity, cost, and power to confer status, rather than any alchemical or "occult" association. Their exclusive use in desserts in modern times is probably due to their new availability and relative cheapness. That is, they no longer served as marks of distinction.

Apart from interpretive shortcomings, this work also contains some mistakes: grains of paradise (*melegueta* pepper) are thought to be cardamom, Nonnius (Nuñez) is referred to as a Frenchman, and illustrations of Jordan almonds and candy (57 and 58) are misidentified as some kind of alchemical calcinated drug.

The most important ingredient missing from the book, however, is medicine. Not only did dietary considerations of humoral physiology link all discussions of food from Galen through Avicenna to Platina, but it was the rejection of these classical authorities that would decisively separate

the culinary "revolution" of the seventeenth century. The spices once required as correctives are replaced with reductions intended to accentuate rather than contrast with the food's basic flavors. In this respect, modern haute cuisine is entirely separate from Western and non-Western culinary traditions, and rightly deserves to be considered as revolutionary as contemporaneous developments in science.

Despite its faults, this is a very thought-provoking book and I would still recommend it, along with any attempt to broaden the horizons of historical inquiry. Renaissance scholars will find this work quite piquant.

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Fred Schreiber. *Simon de Colines. An Annotated Catalogue of 230 Examples of His Press, 1520-1546.* Friends of the Brigham Young University Library, Provo, Utah, 1995. 73 pls. + lxxxiv + 242 pp. \$375, special edition; \$150, regular edition.

Students of early printing will be indebted for decades to come to Fred Schreiber for his fine catalogue of the achievement of Simon de Colines, French Renaissance printer of the early sixteenth century. The author calls his work "a representative sampling" to distinguish it from a complete bibliography of the printer's life work. His sub-title delineates the scope of the catalogue, "An Annotated Catalogue of 230 Examples of His Press, 1520-1546." Building on the century-old standard bibliography of de Colines by Philippe Renouard, Schreiber describes each of his 230 examples in meticulous and impeccable