Reviewed Work: Sweet Invention: A History of Dessert by Michael Krondl

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Sweet Invention: A History of Dessert
Michael Krondl
400 pp. $24.95 (cloth)

Michael Krondl, a most congenial writer, has written the perfect book to grab after dinner, when you want something both entertaining and instructive, with a good dollop of schlag. If you enjoyed his last book on spices (The Taste of Conquest), Sweet Invention is structured similarly—we are taken on a tour of several key cities in the saga of one food group, in this case sugary pastries and dessert writ large. The tour begins in India, close to the origin of sugar itself, and then waltzes over to the Middle East, thence to Italy, France, and Austria, before landing home in the United States.

If you are a dessert hound, you will find yourself salivating over the burfis, halvahs, jalebis, and laddus. Or perhaps your palate will salivate to the description of a dripping gulab jamun (food of the gods, indeed). It is not difficult to imagine these sugary, deep-fried balls of dough as the venerable ancestors of a long line of sweets to follow: the fritelle of the Renaissance, the babas au rhum of French haute cuisine, and the now ubiquitous doughnut. As Krondl chronicles the history of these sweets, we begin to see kinship among a whole range of flaky pastries, pouffy cakes, and chocolaty confections. Each chapter highlights not only some of the most deservedly renowned desserts (such as baklava in Istanbul, Sacher Torte in Vienna, and the Gâteau Saint-Honoré in France) but also the larger social context in which they originated and the stories of those who claim to have invented them. Who knew there was so much drama among confectioners and pâtissiers, so many myths to explode and unsung heroes to extol? Most interestingly, however, the story follows trade routes, the rise and fall of empires, and, lastly, the inventions that revolutionized the modern-day kitchen. Do not mistake the subject for light frippery—this is a knife-and-fork-sized book.

Sweet Invention also offers a history of great pastry chefs old and new, the cookbook authors as well as the humble artisans who ply their sugary trade. There are some remarkable stories in this, tales of lucky souls who happened to be at the right place at the right time and who just happened to record the desserts they tasted from the hands of the great masters. Krondl has done some remarkable archival sleuthing here. Yet each chapter also takes us up to the present, to witness the contemporary fate of longstanding traditions, the last remaining hole-in-the-wall bakery, and the final stale crumbs of once resplendent Konditoreien. Interviews simultaneously introduce us to the pastry chefs and artisan confectioners of our present.

Such a tour, like the pastries themselves, can be heady and dizzying at times, and the book really should come with a warning label. It is bound to have you panting for cake, and by the end of each chapter a tantalizing recipe lures you into the kitchen to have a whirl. Do not make the mistake, as I did, of reading it on an airplane, far from kitchen facilities, bound for somewhere uninteresting, where Strauss waltzes are not playing all night. It took me a week before I could get home to try my hand at making the qatayif! You must also keep in mind that dessert, as we know it, served at the end of a meal, is a fairly recent invention. So feel free while reading this to munch on your favorite biscotti, or even a Hershey bar. The wide world of sweets is all covered here, from the ancient Sumerian proto-sweet to the delicacies found in your own corner bakery. Krondl’s history of sweets is a well-researched, delightfully written book that deserves a space on every food enthusiast’s shelf.

—Ken Albala, University of the Pacific

Mission Street Food: Recipes and Ideas from an Improbable Restaurant
Anthony Myint and Karen Leibowitz
San Francisco: McSweeney’s, 2011
224 pp. Illustrations. $30.00 (cloth)

Anthony Myint and Karen Leibowitz, the founders of several celebrated pop-up restaurants in San Francisco’s Mission District, dub their culinary achievements “improbable.” Their new book, Mission Street Food, describes the pair sweating in kitchens smaller than bathrooms and pokes fun at a business plan that includes an ample budget for pork belly but no line item for a listed telephone number. Four years after serving up their first trumpet-mushroom-topped flatbread, Myint and Leibowitz catalogue the challenges they faced and their successes: dodging the ire of a local real estate mogul, raising tens of thousands of dollars for charities like the San Francisco Food Bank and Project Open Hand, and traversing cultural barriers to partner with a taco truck, a Chinese take-out joint, a Vietnamese grocery store, and a perpetually uninhabited Mexican restaurant.

For all the book’s good-humored self-flagellation, with each incarnation of Mission Street Food, Myint and Leibowitz have been eager to evolve. When the pop-up moved from the taco truck to Lung Shan, for example, they brought guest chefs into the mix, offering talented line