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Reviewed Work: Regional Cuisines of Medieval Europe by Melitta Weiss-Adamson, ed.

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Regional Cuisines of Medieval Europe. Ed. Melitta Weiss-Adamson. London: Routledge, 2002. 254 pp. \$85.00. ISBN 0415929946.

REVIEWED BY: Ken Albala, University of the Pacific

This collection of essays follows up *Food in the Middle Ages* in the Garland Medieval Casebooks series, since taken over by Routledge. Presumably still printed from camera-ready copy as before, the production values are not very high. Despite this, the book assembles some of the leading authorities on medieval cuisine writing today: Constance Heiatt, Carole Lambert, Terence Scully, and the editor, among others. The organizing theme of the essays argues against a long-standing assumption among food historians, that medieval cuisine was essentially monolithic and international and that distinct regional cuisines only emerged in the early modern period. Several of the essays show that while the general flavor preferences associated with the Middle Ages, and often inherited from the Arab world—exotic spices, sweet and sour sauces, almond milk, colored foods—can indeed be found in all medieval cookbooks, the basic substrata of ingredients do differ widely from region to region. And while this was an inevitable consequence of geographical factors, the authors also show that certain dishes and techniques can be characterized as uniquely regional.

Most of the essays provide a general introduction to the historical sources for each region up through the sixteenth century, but it is not entirely clear whether these essays are meant for the novice or the expert. Some assume little prior knowledge, while others enter into fairly complex debates among food historians. Many also refer extensively to work published elsewhere by the authors.

The chapter on Britain does an excellent job in showing that the French influence was not as strong as once believed, and that a distinctly Anglo-Norman style of cookery has more affinities with Italy and Norman Naples in particular. Who could have guessed that the first recipe for ravioli appears in an English cookbook? The emphasis on sweets and sugar, using fruits as cooking ingredients, the obsession with “subtleties” among other unique preferences, appears to have influenced English taste well beyond the Middle Ages.

The chapter on Northern France has little trouble pointing out distinct regional characteristics owing to the large number of medieval French cookbooks. There was a strong emphasis on broths, butcher’s meat such as pork and mutton and poultry, but not, as one might expect, much use of dough or omelets. Nor, to counter another cliché, were large game animals so popular, and never great slabs of roasted beef. The dependence on grape products such as *verjus* (the juice of unripe grapes), wine, and vinegar as flavorings is also pronounced at an early date, along with ginger, saffron, and sugar.

Southern France is also given thorough treatment, despite the existence of only one brief cookbook from fourteenth-century Languedoc. Although much of the evidence provided seems to support the idea that the same basic recipes were just adapted using local ingredients, there does appear to have been a unique Southern French cuisine, even if it did not include tomatoes or a *cassoulet*. Surprisingly many typical medieval dishes found throughout Europe, such as *escabèche*, *aillade* (garlic sauce) are now only found around the Mediterranean. This itself seems to argue that medieval cuisine was more international than it later came to be. But there is evidence of regional distinctiveness—the use of pomegranates, lemons, chickpeas, saffron, and sugar. All, of course, are legacies of the Moorish influence on European cuisine.

Coverage of Italy is unfortunately restricted almost solely to the fifteenth-century cookbook of Martino as used by Platina in his *De honesta voluptate*. The chapter does not

appear to reflect any original research. Nor does the author seem to know what *verjuice* was, and we are asked to swallow other improbabilities—that pasta was commonly made with rice flour, that ordinary people sometimes ate three meals a day, that there were European varieties of *phaseolis vulgaris*.

The Arab origins of medieval and present-day Sicilian cuisine are well traced in the next chapter. Pasta, sugar, lemons, ice cream, marzipan, eggplants, artichokes, as well as numerous agricultural techniques all arrived via the Arabs. The chapter on Spain, along similar lines, offers an excellent overview of the sources for Spanish culinary history as well as the various currents which influenced it: Arab, Jewish, and Christian, and finally New World products.

The chapter on Germany is very detailed, discussing not only elite cuisine as found in cookbooks, but common food and problems with the food supply during war and famine, and the difficulty of dealing with Lent. There is extensive discussion of dietetic literature as well as other sources. The author argues persuasively that while many features of German cooking share common characteristics with the rest of Europe, there were unique ingredients, cooking methods, and flavor preferences. Purees and puddings (mush), fritters and flat cakes, and jellies are just a few examples. A chapter on the Low Countries and their preference for dairy products, especially butter, beef, and fish such as herring concludes the book. This chapter also includes a detailed account of sixteenth-century monastic meal plans from Haarlem.

In the end, this volume presents a thorough and detailed discussion of the regional differences in medieval cuisine and the influence of geographical, religious, and social factors upon culinary traditions. While it may not entirely dispel the notion that cooking was indeed still very international, and very much influenced by the Arab world, it does help to bring each region into sharper focus, and is an invaluable contribution to our understanding of European cuisine up into the sixteenth century.

