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Reviewed Works: Pleyn Delit: Medieval Cookery for Modern Cooks. by Constance B. Heiatt, Brenda Hosington, Sharon Butler; Take a Thousand Eggs or More. by Cindy Renfrow

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Pleyn Delit: Medieval Cookery for Modern Cooks. Constance B. Heiatt, Brenda Hosington, and Sharon Butler. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996. Second Edition. xxvii + 172 pp. \$17.95.

Take a Thousand Eggs or More. Cindy Renfrow. Pottstown, PA: Cindy Renfrow, 1990. Vol. 1: iv + 238 pp. Vol. 2: iv + 381 pp. \$23.00.

A completely revised edition of a medieval cookbook first published in the seventies, now purged of earlier errors, is the latest offering for those who care to savor the past literally. Most of the recipes are drawn from English fourteenth-century sources, but there is also a liberal sprinkling of entries from France (Taillevent and Le Ménagier) and Italy (Platina).

While most historians shudder at the very whiff of the average “Medieval/Renaissance Banquet” or “Faire” and it is true that these affairs can permanently stunt the historical sensibilities of an impressionable enthusiast, there is really no reason to shun the cookery of the past provided one sticks to the sources and strives for accuracy.

Accuracy is possible using this collection, which includes original excerpted texts, but the temptation to yield to the bowdlerized instructions for “modern cooks” is so great that it seems more cooks will be led astray than instructed. The authors can be excused for suggesting certain substitute ingredients: grains of paradise and cubebs are indeed (nearly) impossible to find. But why verjus is throughout replaced with lemon is baffling; sour under-ripe grapes are, alas, everywhere.

Often the modern directions are faithful to the original, perhaps merely clarifying and providing measurements. At other times, however, the authors depart for no reason or even make a recipe more difficult. A case in point is “Oysters in Cyvee”—essentially parboiled oysters with their own broth, set on bread crusts with onions, herbs, and herbs, and vinegar. The modernization turns it into a blended soup with wine and onions sautéed in butter. Even more curious are the altered directions for making a “Compost.” Carefully following the original fourteenth-century English version yields a very snappy sweet sort of cole slaw with root vegetables, pears, and currants. The revision not only removes the cabbage and turnip greens, but adds walnuts soaked for three days and then mashes the whole lot into a spicy mashed turnip chutney, far less palatable than the original—as well as inauthentic.

Not that we need to be slaves to the text; modern cooks’ reluctance to make a blood-based venison broth or to use chicken heads in a “garbage” stew is understandable. But this should alert us to the fact that tastes have indeed changed—dramatically—and to “mess forth” something so altered as to be a different dish, that entirely defeats the point of studying the past and its foodways.

The majority of this book can still be used profitably, but the serious cook/historian should stick to the original texts. They are for the most part clear and usually quite enticing. Especially recommended are the many extinct sauces: the almond milk-based are luscious; the green sauce and camelline could easily pass for nouvelle. The “Saracen” dishes are as appealing today as 700 years ago, and little changed. For those primarily interested in the sixteenth century, there are several offerings from Platina’s *De Honesta Voluptate*, probably the most popular cookbook and health manual of the Renaissance.

A comparable collection which appeared earlier this decade is also worthy of mention, though not without its own peculiarities. *Take a Thousand Eggs or More* is composed entirely of fifteenth-century recipes translated from *Two Fifteenth Century Cookery Books* (Harleian MS 279 & 4016, edited by Thomas Austin, EETS o.s. 91, London: Oxford University Press, 1888; repr 1964). Whether fifteenth century English requires “translation” or might be better merely annotated is not certain, but when volume 1 offers the originals, translations as well

as modern adaptations, this causes some measure of redundancy. For example, the recipe for a Tansy includes two versions in the original spelling with translations and a modern adaptation totaling five in all. For apple fritters we are given nine versions. This might be of use for textual analysis, but is too much for the cook.

To the author's credit, however, the adaptations are usually very faithful to the original. A case in point is the aforementioned Tansy, accurately rendered into modern cookbook format, despite the fact that tansy has been found to be toxic. We are merely warned to perhaps skip this one. This is undoubtedly preferable to the advice found in *Pleyn Delit* which takes a similar Tansy recipe from the *Liber Cure Cocorum* and changes it to Green Pancakes because "small pancakes seem more attractive than a cut up green omelet." In contrast, Renfrow rarely takes the liberty to change recipes to suit modern tastes and aversions.

In only a few cases do the original directions appear to be misinterpreted, as in the recipe for Guissell which is here adapted to be a stuffing. It was more likely a soup with spaetzel-like dumplings of egg and bread crumbs, as is suggested by the description that they "come togidre, and crudded" —like curds and whey. The term "guissell" is also related to "jussell" and "jusculum" both of which mean broth.

Volume 2 of *Take a Thousand Eggs* offers the remainder of the recipes translated but without adaptations, and most are easy enough for any vaguely experienced cook to follow and are certainly worth browsing through to get an idea of what was eaten in fifteenth-century England.

The only serious drawback to this collection is a spate of distracting quotes mostly from Chaucer, Bacon, and Spencer (sic) taken out of context and cluttering an already hefty pair of books. The illustrations are even more infuriating because as charming as they are (mostly from Scappi or Spanish woodcuts for some reason) they appear several times throughout both volumes. Without this filler, the work would have been far more manageable.

Regarding the volume and range of recipes offered, this collection is encyclopedic and does still provide an excellent option for those unwilling to spend time deciphering the originals, and certainly makes a good reference work for those who want to liven a lecture with the flavors of a bygone era.

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