

Tasteful discussions

By Katherine A. Powers | November 18, 2007

We have entered the season of the groaning board, and I have been looking through a few of the cookbooks I inherited from my mother. As usual, the exercise has transported me from melancholy over her careful annotations to a certain history-reveling gaiety brought on by the books' pronouncements on cookery and the changing spectrum of food. For one thing, a macabre assortment of offal and organ meats gives way to a greater variety of vegetables - though the 1901 "St. Cloud [Minn.] Cook Book" (compiled by the Improvement League) is still the place to find Baked Tomatoes with Grape-Nuts.

An air of rigorous instruction and improvement reigns in American cookbooks from the first part of the 20th century. The 1945 edition of Mrs. Simon Kander's 1901 "The Way to a Man's Heart: The Settlement Cook Book" provides hundreds of recipes, but also instructions for such things as making soap and brewing catnip tea. Hers is one of the most benevolent American books I own. Its object is to introduce immigrants, German Jews in Milwaukee initially, to the science and vocation of feeding and caring for the family while, at the same time - and more unusually - honoring their own cuisine. I much prefer Mrs. Kander to Boston's Fannie Farmer, a woman maddened by science, a stern disciplinarian, and a dominatrix of food who, in her 1918 edition, would have us boil spinach 25 to 30 minutes. (Mrs. Kander desists at 4 to 5.)

Moving away from America, as my mother did for some time, a couple of English books provide the clue to the reason for the once-sordid state of British cuisine. As with practically everything British, it boiled down to class. In her 1974 "Cookery of England," Elisabeth Ayrton observes that the pretensions to gentility of the 19th-century urban middle class propelled women out of the kitchen and into the parlor. There, remote from the coarseness of handling food, such ladies emulated the "fashionable and upper-class world which could afford to import its chefs" and demanded "French" cuisine. This is surely the explanation for the tide of béchamel sauce that covered the land and only began to recede - in select quarters - after the Second World War. Writing in her 1951 "French Country Cooking," Elizabeth David, the would-be savior of the British table, noted that "rationing, the disappearance of servants, and the bad and expensive meals served in restaurants, have led Englishwomen to take a far greater interest in food than was

formerly considered polite."

And a good thing too, you might say, except judging from Kate Colquhoun's just-published **"Taste: The Story of Britain Through Its Cooking"** (Bloomsbury, \$34.95), it wasn't Elizabeth David who induced the better sort of girl to enter the kitchen. It was Constance Spry and Rosemary Hume, a society florist and "a proficient cook," who "had invented the dish of the decade: coronation chicken, with its curried, creamy mayonnaise and apricot purée." They were the authors of the 1956 "Constance Spry Cookery Book," which unseated Mrs. Beeton as the vade mecum of just-married upper-middle-class girls and in which "the word suitable cropped up on almost every page."

Colquhoun's book is a racketing, impressionist, nicely illustrated tear through two millennia of British culinary practices, taking in the most arresting details. We are offered glimpses of medieval Britons calculating the balance of humors in their diets, shrinking from cold, moist egg whites and, worst of all, cream, which was understood to "put men in jeopardy of their lives." There are sightings of the introduction of American plants, the voluptuous embrace of sugar by the Virgin Queen, the advent of coffee, chocolate, and tea, and on and on to the punishing, ersatz dishes of the Second World War. It is sometime after that, however, that the book begins to lose its enthralled American reader. By the 1970s British brand names, television shows, and their stars take over, leaving us ex-colonists feeling decidedly out of it.

It is obvious how much fashion has to do with what and how we eat today, but when I think of the big picture of food in the Western world, I think of fashion less as a cause than an effect of changes in technology, science, demographics, transportation, and economics. The main purpose of Michael Krondl's **"The Taste of Conquest: The Rise and Fall of the Three Great Cities of Spice"** (Ballantine, \$25.95) is to show the three distinct ways in which Venice, Lisbon, and Amsterdam came, in turn, to dominate the spice trade and to burgeon in population and wealth, and to show also how shifts in that trade led to the cities' subsequent decline and, indeed, to amnesia about their own past. He does this with deft command over a welter of facts and with entertaining insouciance ("As usual, we find out about the improved quality of contemporary life by people's griping about it"). In the course of all this, he not only shows the impact of taste in changing the entire world, but gives fashion far greater sway than is customary.

Krondl begins with the introduction of spice, especially pepper, cinnamon, ginger, cardamom, nutmeg, mace, and cloves, into Europe and argues convincingly that the popularity of these ingredients in the Middle Ages was not, as we are forever hearing, because they disguised the taste of decaying food. Rather, people used

vast amounts of spice because it was, of course, a useful way of balancing the humors, but also because they really, really liked the flavor. Beyond that, the costliness of spices and their exotic associations with Eden made their use fashionable. KRONDL demonstrates that medieval cuisine, except that of the poor, whose aim was simply to eat, was highly seasoned indeed. Then, oddly, with the 18th century, spices almost vanished from European main courses. The reasons are complex (and briskly and compellingly conveyed), but two stand out as being based in fashion. In the first place, as KRONDL explains, spices lost their cachet as "aromatic missives from paradise" when spice became a "mundane commodity poured like coal into the hold of Dutch East Indiamen." But of even great moment to the fate of spicy cuisine was the invention of dessert as a separate course. Spices gravitated into sweet foods and away from the main dishes and were thus, in a manner of speaking, trivialized. Fashion is just one element in this wonderful book, which itself is an altogether rich, perfectly seasoned slice of world history.

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