CURRENT BOOKS

Reviews of new and noteworthy nonfiction

Table Talk

FOOD:
A Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present.
By Jean-Louis Flandrin and Massimo Montanari; transl. by Albert Sonnenfeld.
Penguin. 592 pp. $18

THE CAMBRIDGE WORLD HISTORY OF FOOD.
Edited by Kenneth F. Kiple and
Kriemhild Conée Ornelas. Cambridge Univ. Press.
2 vols. 1958 pp. $150

BEST FOOD WRITING 2000.
Edited by Holly Hughes. Marlow & Co. 348 pp. $14.95

THE TASTE OF AMERICA.
By John L. and Karen Hess.
Univ. of Illinois Press. 390 pp. $18.95

Reviewed by Lis Harris

Our schools may be crumbling, the audience for serious music, literature, and painting shrunken to pitiful proportions, but we have become ever more choosy about what we eat and where we eat it. Your local supermarket, once the provenance of only the meagerest array of humble vegetables alongside the Spaghetti-O's, has become a veritable souk. Faster ways of transporting goods, genetic engineering, and the general shrinking of the world have brought us terrifyingly unbruisable fresh fruit in all seasons, half a dozen varieties of edible fungi, sparkling sushi, cheeses from remote hamlets in faraway countries, two kinds of Thai curry paste, Italian radicchio, and hundreds of other erstwhile rarities, including five kinds of potatoes, one of which may well be purple.

Nationwide, the restaurant business is booming; in New York alone, 311 restaurants opened in 1999. Although Americans spent $15.75 billion on kitchen cookware that same year, they are working harder and eating out more frequently. To some extent, their food habits signal changes in their interests and values: The generation-to-generation, culturally bound passing-down of eating proclivities and ways of cooking, though still alive, has given way among the stressed and office-bound affluent to a preference for fancy takeout foods, and, further down the economic scale, to a reliance on frozen and fast foods.

One result of this trend has been the seemingly endless proliferation of cookbooks, essays, and treatises about food. As I paddled through a small tributary from this mighty torrent, a phrase I once encountered in a largely admiring biography of

D. H. Lawrence, suggesting that he gave the act of sex "a weight it will not bear," came not infrequently to mind.

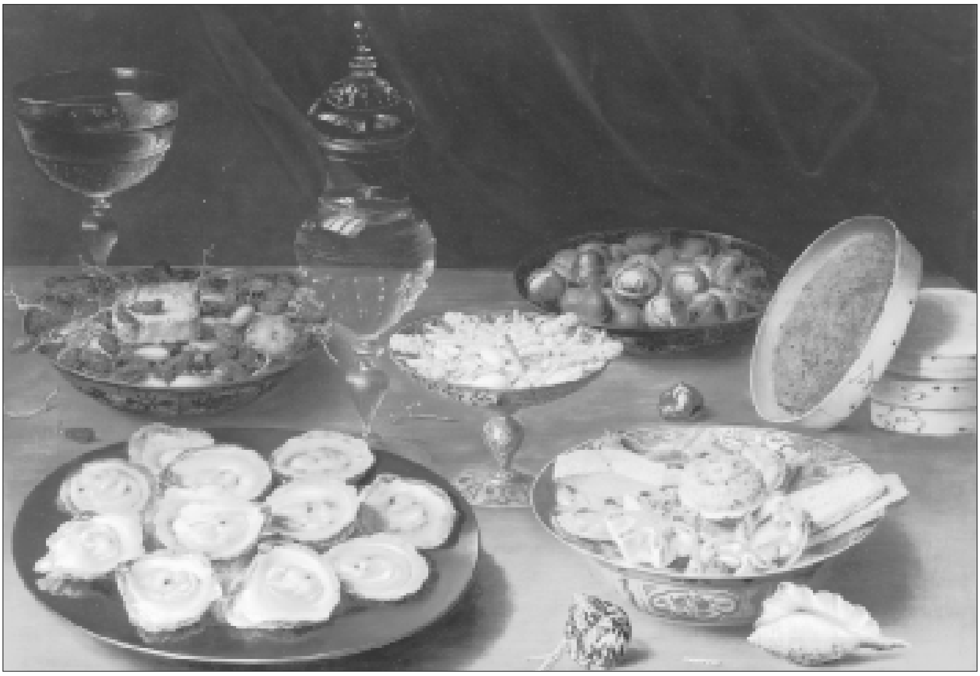
Academic speculation about food has had something of the aura of a gold rush over the past decade. Three hundred U.S. anthropologists call themselves specialists in food studies; courses on food and culture are an accepted part of the curricula of the University of California, Berkeley, and Johns Hopkins, Cornell, and Emory Universities; and an annual scholarly meeting, the Oxford University Food Conference, and the American Institute of Wine and Food's *Journal of Gastronomy* have given the food world a certain gravitas. Culinary and gastronomic history have, in short, "moved to the front burner," as Albert Sonnenfeld, Chevalier Professor of French and Comparative Literature at the University of Southern California, writes in the preface to his translation of Jean-Louis Flandrin and Massimo Montanari's excellent compendium *Food: A Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present*.

Flandrin and Montanari, two well-respected European food historians, have compiled a fascinating, readable collection of essays by a wide range of experts who trace the links between food and culture, from the prehistoric and biblical eras through the Middle Ages to contemporary times and the McDonald's-ization of Europe. Sonnenfeld provides an intelligently edited English translation of the 1996 French original, which, replete with graphs, endless lists, statistics, charts, and repetitions, was not easily digested. Written for both the layperson and a growing army of culinary academicians, restaurateurs, and the professionally food-alert, *Food* offers an omnium-gatherum that explores, among other things, the relationship between diet and social hierarchy, explodes various longstanding myths, such as the belief that pasta originated in China and was brought to the West by Marco Polo (it seems to have originated in the Mezzogiorno, in Italy, and traveled northward), and manages to be both clear and streamlined without compromising the historian's fealty to scholarship and complexity.

Unlike Sonnenfeld, who has kindly eradicated such roadblocks as a full-page delineation of the per acre yield of artichokes in the Finistère in 16th-century Brittany, the editors of the two-volume *Cambridge World History of Food*, historians Kenneth F. Kiple and Kriemhild Conée Ornelas, apparently had a laity-be-damned attitude. Theirs is the kind of book often described as "magisterial," weighing in at just over 11 pounds and omitting no chart, table, list, or statistic its 220 experts from 15 countries thought typeworthy. Contributors come from many fields—agronomy, animal science, nutrition, history, geography, anthropology, public health, sociology, and zoology (a by-no-means complete roster). Though as a reference book on a particular subject (say, yaks, khat, or iodine deficiency disorders) it would be an excellent tool, few civilians grazing through the 15-page section on algae, for example, are likely to survive the four full pages and six half or three-quarter pages of tables.

Outside the academy, the American discovery and embrace of sophisticated foodways has also been astounding. In 1998, the latest year for which statistics are available, 1,060 cookbooks were published in this country. If you think, as I did, that there is a basic contradiction between the brisk sale of cookbooks and the fact that fewer people seem to be cooking, an interesting essay by the food writer Anne Mendelsohn, in *Best Food Writing 2000*, explains the reason, apparently long known to publishers and booksellers: The average purchaser of a cookbook does not actually read it. Rather, "thousands of people get their greatest pleasure . . . by sitting down with it and floating into realms of imagination conjured up by clever graphics, opulent layouts, and above all, color photographs." Since most cookbooks are pricey, this seems an expensive way of zoning out, but apparently well worth it, especially for the buyer of the celebrity-chef cookbook, who becomes "not just a citizen of some generic food-fantasy land but a sharer in the restaurant-theater energy generated by particular superstars. Eat at the shrine, buy the cookbook, belong to the enchanted circle." The chef, of course, does not cook from a cookbook, and the editor or co-author hired to convert a restaurant's dishes into home recipes may not be a reliable translator.

The Mendelsohn theory may also account for the generally so-so quality of much of



Banquet Piece with Oysters, Fruit, and Wine *(c. 1610/1620), by Osias Beert the Elder*

today's popular food writing. Foodies who write are part of a service industry. Their charge is often narrow—to review (or promote) a restaurant, to "discover" a food or food trend, or to portray, as favorably as possible, a well-known chef. The broad-ranging, freewheeling approach to gastronomical essays exemplified by A. J. Liebling (1904–63) and M. F. K. Fisher (1908–92), who still represent the gold standard in the genre, is simply not an option.

"The primary requisite for writing well about food," wrote Liebling, in an essay in *Between Meals: An Appetite for Paris* (1962), "is a good appetite." In a typical Liebling construct, he remarks that "in the light of what Proust wrote with so mild a stimulus [as the madeleine], it is the world's loss that he did not have a heartier appetite." But Liebling's appetite in truth was for the human comedy; he wrote about food as a way of writing about the character of the people who consumed it, an obliqueness of purpose that may well offer the best approach to this most quotidian of subjects. Here is the superb Monsieur Mirande, an elderly Parisian bon vivant, primed, like so many figures Liebling admired, "in the heroic age before the first world war," keeper of multiple mistresses, one of whom runs his and Liebling's favorite restaurant: "a small alert man with the face of a Celtic terrier, salient eyebrows and an upturned nose. He looked like an intelligent Lloyd George." Not an Anglophile, Liebling. The subject of food turns up from time to time directly in his work because Liebling was always fascinated by prodigious feats of gastronomy; in the same essay he and Mirande tuck into a "whacking" lunch, involving, among other things, "a truite au bleu—a live trout simply done to death in hot water, like a Roman emperor in his bath . . . doused with enough butter to thrombose a whole regiment of Paul Dudley Whites," a daube provençale, several guinea hens, some early spring asparagus, and three bottles of wine. Of course you remember the food, but what lingers in your mind long afterward is the singularity of the pair who ate it.

M. F. K. Fisher, like Liebling (though she was a far different kind of writer—crankier, more inward, more personal, and, as a creator of actual cookbooks such as *How to Cook a Wolf*, *The Gastronomical Me*, and *Consider the Oyster*, more kitchen-serviceable), brings to her gastronomic essays a quirkiness of vision and a deftness with language that are wholly original. And, like Liebling, Fisher produced prose that was an energetic mix of high and low. Her 1949 translation of the 1825 treatise

The Physiology of Taste, or Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy, by Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (he of the famous aphorism "Tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are"), added a certain heft to her professional persona, as did the memoirs, essays, fiction, and journals that eventually earned her election to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

Both Liebling and Fisher eschewed writing about the passing fashions of their times—their interests were more idiosyncratic—but neither of them was particularly interested in one-upping those who did—unlike, for example, John L. and Karen Hess, a former *New York Times* journalist and a cookbook author, respectively, who have cast themselves as the scourges of our debased popular-food culture. The appendix of their recently rereleased *The Taste of America* (originally published in 1972) includes their infamous and dotty attack on Julia Child, in which the woman who cheerfully brought French cooking into the homes of the multitudes is calumnized as if she were an ax murderess. As George Orwell once remarked about Thomas Carlyle, "an obscure spite" seems to be at work here. Unlike the Hess team, Liebling and Fisher are, above all, generous writers, and though they are deeply bound to reality, their work also retains a mysterious elusiveness.

By contrast, too much of the prose in *Best Food Writing 2000* seems formulaic. It's probably no accident that the two most memorable pieces in the collection, "A Day in the Life" by Anthony Bourdain and "The Belly of Paris" by Megan Wetherall, are heavily reported essays that evoke, respectively, an eye-popping you-are-there sense of the hysterical pace and extraordinary demands of a popular New York City restaurant and the world of the bistros of the old Les Halles (and the *après le déluge* spirit of the few remaining ones); or that the other strong essays in the collection, by R. W. Apple, Nancy Harmon Jenkins, Calvin Trillin, and Rick Bragg, are by professional journalists, accustomed to rummaging around until they produce interesting information. Apple's workmanlike prose ("I love bacon. Sizzle! Pop!") reminds us that one of the benefits of good food writing is that it allows for a certain wholeheartedness that is often off limits in other nonfiction genres, where the cool and the measured reign supreme.

Some of the less successful essays in the collection, such as "Pasta Meets Tomato," are near parodies. Here, the sensual-mystical attractions of the kitchen hold the writer in their grip: "I cook listening to something beyond a recipe—the tomatoes always seem to tell me what kind of sauce they want to be this time." "The Chef of the Future" considers the hot chef of the moment, a man whose restaurant in an out-of-the-way Spanish hamlet has become a mecca for European and transatlantic chefs and upper-tax-bracket travelers, and whose waiters issue stern directives to customers about how and when to eat certain foods on their plate. Unfortunately, the author, a professional food critic, although assuring the reader that she approached her first visit "with skepticism," seems cowed by the chef; she is too quick to join, as she puts it, "the apostles," too reluctant to sound even the smallest note of alarm about his dubious hijinks, including the presentation of a single strawberry macerated in melted Fisherman's Friend, a throat lozenge.

At the other end of the spectrum is "It Takes a Village to Kill a Pig," a slick, epicurean frivolity about the obsessive search of the writer (another food critic) for the perfect boudin noir recipe and ingredients. This quest involves several transatlantic journeys and the apparently money-is-no-object securing of a small brigade of assistants and exotic equipment. As a piece of writing, it provides a satisfyingly thorough description of arcane Gallic sausage-making techniques, but the author's propensity for name-dropping and "I was there and you weren't" self-satisfaction does not make him good company on the page. When, on the pretext of using the bathroom, he creeps into his friend's larder and considers filching a tin of excellent boudin noir, the frank revelation detracts from our already shaky sense of confidence. In fact, we make a mental note, should he ever show up at *our* door, to lock up the silver.

Somehow, Liebling and Fisher managed to transmute their musings on the lowly subject of food into art. They were sly, funny people who shared a largeness of spirit and a stubborn distaste for cant that make even their oldest work seem bracing. But they also lived in more capacious times. Both enjoyed long associations with the *New Yorker*, which encouraged their individualistic bent and eclectic interests and gave them the freedom to write whatever they wanted to. If, by comparison, their professional progeny seem to be starvelings who have been forced to breathe thinner air, that's because they are, and have.

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Feminist Foremother

MARGARET FULLER, CRITIC:
***Writings from the* New-York Tribune,**
1844–1846.
Edited by Judith Mattson Bean and Joel Myerson. Columbia Univ. Press.
491pp. plus CD-ROM. $75

"MY HEART IS A LARGE KINGDOM":
Selected Letters of Margaret Fuller.
Edited by Robert N. Hudspeth.
Cornell Univ. Press. 368 pp. $29.95

MARGARET FULLER'S CULTURAL CRITIQUE:
Her Age and Legacy.
Edited by Fritz Fleischmann.
Peter Lang. 296 pp. $55.95

Reviewed by Elaine Showalter

The editors of these three books make a vigorous case for the cultural importance of Margaret Fuller (1810–50). "Given the range of her interests and the sophistication of her writing, no other American woman of her time, with the possible exception of Emily Dickinson, so commands our attention," writes Robert Hudspeth, a professor of English at the University of Redlands. Fuller is "today established as a canonical figure," according to Fritz Fleischmann, a professor of English at Babson College in Massachusetts. The past 20 years have seen the publication of Fuller's letters, essays, journals, and translations, and in 1992 the first volume of Charles Capper's magnificent biography, *Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic Life*, both positioned her in the larger context of American intellectual history and illuminated the extraordinary scope and drama of her life. Consequently, suggests

Margaret Fuller