

## Bookends

### *The Sound of Poets Cooking*

Edited by Richard Krawiec

Durham, NC: Jacar Press, 2010

172 pp. \$15.95 (paper)

Creative cooks read recipes to savor the remembered tastes of ingredients, comparing the step-by-step processes to their own experiences. We speak of the poetry in a successful fusion of flavors. Following a recipe to the letter produces food that is edible, but food that is memorable more often demands a personal touch from the cook—or the guidance of an expert.

A successful poem is also savored, releasing new meanings at each reading, associating memories through rhythm and imagery. Crafting a poem requires gusto for choosing just the right combinations of these ingredients, similar to a cook's sense of just the right amount of spice. A writer needs more than an appetite for words to get started.

Recognizing this need to provide recipes for writers, teacher and author Richard Krawiec organizes free community writing workshops. He compiled this poetry cookbook as an “arts-stimulus” program with proceeds going to sustain the workshops. The resulting anthology stimulates the blending of art and food into experiences to be savored.

The poems contributed by more than sixty southern writers are accompanied by recipes, sometimes reflecting a poem but often simply the poet's choice, from family, neighbors, and their own creations. A delightful smorgasbord of styles and dishes awaits the reader. This is not likely a book to be referenced for technique, either culinary or poetic; rather it is a peek into the essence of a region through images and tastes.

The poems are worthy of devouring even outside the kitchen. Former North Carolina Poets Laureate Fred Chappell (on the ubiquitous potluck casserole) and Kathryn Stripling Byer (on butternut squash and the garden ghosts) help you taste scenes familiar to local folk. Poet Al Maginnes sets a place for food in our lives: “...aware only / of appetite that would not be done / until it had become / the human taste for bread.”

Sylvia Freeman describes the making of *Aunt Wilma's Coconut Cake* as “This rhythmical ritual of making a cake had become the music in her life” and then provides the recipe cherished by generations. Other poets contribute an eclectic medley of cookbook-worthy scripts for such favorites as mac and cheese, fig tart, Brussels sprouts and goat

cheese risotto, and rosehip curry—and a poem that when followed literally creates gumbo as well as understanding.

—Ardath Weaver, North Carolina Arts Council

### *Ginger and Ganesh: Adventures in Indian Cooking, Culture, and Love*

Nani Power

Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint 2010

240 pp. \$16.50 (cloth)

“Please teach me Indian Vegetarian cooking! I will bring ingredients and pay you \$10/hr for your trouble. I would like to know about your culture as well.”

In 2008 Nani Power, Virginia-based writer and aficionado of spicy Indian food, impulsively placed this ad on Craig's list. Much to her delight, more than a dozen Indian immigrants who lived within driving distance of her home responded. Many of her hosts offered her ginger-flavored *chai*, milky black tea, as a welcome beverage. Over time, some shared their life stories with her. Ganesh, the jovial elephant-headed Hindu god, believed to be the “remover of obstacles,” was the presiding deity in many of the homes Power visited.

As the author rightly suspected, in the hands of seasoned cooks even plain old potatoes turn into aromatic creations vastly superior to buffet dishes at the average Indian restaurant. Learning to cook in this intimate setting, woman-to-woman, Power rolled out *rotis* (flat, unleavened bread), blended *masalas* (spice mixes for curries), and made *paneer* (cottage cheese) from scratch. Reading her book, I regretted not having acquired these skills while growing up in India.

In the culture department, Power compares her way of life with that of her hosts, speculates about their love lives and philosophies, and reads up on India's religious sects to better understand these immigrants. Unfortunately, her understanding does not always run deep. She writes, for instance, “While a Christian will openly talk of their faith if asked, and in fact proselytize, as some branches actually demand, a Hindi will guard their ways with a certain reticence” (p.56). Power no doubt meant “Hindu” here—a practitioner of the ancient faith of Hinduism; Hindi is India's widely spoken language. Further, Sarasvati, the Goddess of Learning, is not the daughter of Lord Shiva and Goddess Durga, as Power writes. The Hindu pantheon is crowded, but the author should have verified the genealogical details, which in any case add little to the story.

This food memoir of nineteen essays of varying length, some with recipes attached, has no underlying structure. The

book's theme—that cooking need not be regarded as drudgery—is uplifting, but for a book about spices, the writing is surprisingly bland, even banal, as in this sentence on turmeric: “It is known to assist in helping anemia, cancer, diabetes, digestion, food poisoning, gall stones, indigestion, IBS, parasites, poor circulation, staph infections, and wounds” (p.166). Likewise, Power tries to pack in too much information about a cuisine and the culture behind it into one slim volume. However, her summary chapter on the rudiments of Indian cooking could be a good resource for beginners.

—V.Vijaysree, Boston

*Boozehound: On the Trail of the Rare, the Obscure, and the Overrated in Spirits*

Jason Wilson

Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2010

240 pp. \$22.99 (cloth)

The development of more advanced methods of distilling alcohol served as a harbinger of the industrial revolution. As Jason Wilson tells us in *Boozehound*, the distillation of spirits initially allowed farmers to profit from ripe fruit at the end of the growing season that hadn't been sold or eaten; today, spirits have grown into a \$54 billion industry (p.4).

Wilson is the spirits writer for the *Washington Post*, an enviable job that allows him access to industry functions and distillers throughout the world. He has done due diligence, having apprenticed under the likes of F. Paul Pacult and David Wondrich. In this volume he shares his globe-trotting experiences to various distilleries, where he tastes bitters, piscos, digestifs, appetizers, and mixed drinks.

Entering into this cavernous old warehouse room was like walking into a medieval spice bazaar, an alchemist's laboratory, a temple of holy herbs. Stacks of chincona bark, pallets of bitter orange, vats of aloe and chamomile, and—to get a little biblical—myrrh. Frenet-Branca's secret recipe (created in 1845) has more than forty ingredients in all, including Chinese rhubarb, orris root, cardamom, gentian, marjoram, mace, peppermint, and, of course, anise. I saw pallets and pallets of saffron, an ingredient so key to Fernet-Branca that the company reportedly controls 75 percent of the world's saffron market. (p.104)

Lamenting the lack of a digestif culture in the United States, Jorg Rupf of St. George Spirits in Alameda, California, remarks, “As soon as coffee and dessert comes, so does the bill. In Europe, when you have your table, you have it for the whole night. An eau-de-vie is a wonderful culinary tradition” (p.145). Wilson excoriates the hegemony of vodka in American mixology, with its flavorless, odorless, colorless nature; he reveals that, curiously, Jägermeister, a digestif favored by older people in Germany, is the trendy shot drink of American college students.

Wilson visits the distillery of Hans Reisetbauer, the Austrian artisanal maker of some of the finest eau-de-vie in the world—he uses a fruit ratio of twenty-five pounds of pears or apples to make one liter of eau-de-vie (p.146). These sorts of details exemplify the obsessive nature of the distillers in their quest for a superlative beverage. Wilson's relentless search for flavor and his inclusion of several dozen recipes make *Boozehound* a worthy read.

—Gregory Gould, Albuquerque, NM