

Lawrence R. SCHEHR and Allen S. WEISS, eds., *French Food on the Table, on the Page and in French Culture*, Routledge, 2001, pp.262, £15.99, ISBN 0-415-93628-4 (pbk)

This book consists of fourteen food-related case studies sandwiched between two essays which seek to set out something of the appropriate theoretical framework for an analysis of French food. The editors' 'Hors d'Oeuvres' exhorts us to 'Read and eat well!' (p.3), and the volume as a whole manages to maintain something of this light-hearted tone. At the same time, however, it provides a number of fascinating critical insights into French culinary practices and the manner in which they have been represented on the page and on the screen.

Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson's long opening essay draws on Bourdieu's concept of the cultural field in order to explain the prominent position of food within French national culture. The French 'gastronomic field', she argues, emerged during the course of the nineteenth century. Consolidated by, among other things, the growth of the restaurant, the professionalization of cookery and the development of a powerful culinary discourse, by the end of the century French gastronomy had become an enterprise through which class and nation could themselves be defined. Two of the essays in the volume examine the work of key figures in the construction of this culinary discourse. Michael Garval, for example, examines Grimod de la Reynière, identifying among other things Brillat-Savarin's apparent indebtedness to his work. Philip Hyman's concern is the writing of Antonin Carême, and his espousal of *cuisine moderne*, one of several attempts in French food history to reinvent culinary practice.

Ferguson's analysis allows her to explain in theoretical terms not only why French food culture is arguably so resilient to threats from alternative food practices such as McDonald's, but also how it differs from the more diverse, diffuse ways of

American culinary culture. Furthermore, unlike the latter, she argues, 'the gastronomic field points us toward other cultural fields and particularly toward the arts' (p.41). Most of the other essays in this book explore precisely this terrain. Two of them, by Marc Smeets and Naomi Schor respectively, focus predominantly on the work of the writer Joris-Karl Huysmans. Brigitte Mahuzier's essay examines Colette's '*écriture gourmande*', ranging from the schoolgirl characters in *Claudine in School* who nibble on a bizarre variety of objects, from cigarette papers to pencils, to Colette's own penchant for 'a twelve-pound loaf of dark country bread' (p.109) spread with butter. Meanwhile, Franc Schuerewegen convincingly shows how Proust's description of oysters allows us to understand the complexity with which Proust negotiated his sexuality in his writing. The next two essays in the volume turn to two largely neglected works. Lawrence Schehr explores *La Vie et la passion de Dodin Bouffant, gourmet*, published in 1924. Its author, Marcel Rouff, is best remembered today for collaborating with Curnonsky on *La France gastronomique*. Gerald Prince's essay examines the 'dietetic rantings' (p.144) of the now largely forgotten Maxene Van der Meersch, author of the award-winning 1943 best-seller *Corps et âmes*. Returning to more familiar writers, George Bauer's article explains the role of cocktails and other alcoholic beverages in Simone de Beauvoir's intellectual development, while Pierre Verdaguer focuses on Georges Simenon, among others, in his analysis of the politics of food in French detective fiction. Francis 'Pim' Higginson's study of Ferdinand Oyono's novel *Le Vieux Nègre et la médaille* is the last of those essays in the collection with largely literary concerns.

Only two essays explicitly address media representations of French food. Dana Strand contrasts Marcel Pagnol's 1938 film *La Femme du boulanger* with Claire Denis's 1996 film *Nénette et Boni*. While the former invokes an intense and straightforward relationship between food and national identity, she argues, the latter shows that, by the end of the twentieth century, this relationship has

become increasingly complex and precarious. Meanwhile, Toby Miller provides an account of some of the forms in which French cuisine has been served up on British and American television. The volume also includes a delicious essay by Stéphane Spoiden, which offers a detailed cultural analysis of *moules-frites* in relation to Belgian national identity. Ingeniously, Spoiden notes the way in which this 'dish-that-is-not-one' serves as the national dish of a 'country-that-is-not-one' (p.164).

An essay by Allen Weiss completes the volume, exploring ways in which we might overcome some of the shortcomings in Kant's analysis of taste in order to resolve some of the problems which arise when we talk about culinary preferences. As with Ferguson's opening essay, Weiss offers some very useful theoretical insights.

One of the book's potential weaknesses is its predominantly literary focus. In an era of food scares and anxieties about *la malbouffe*, there was undoubtedly scope to examine contemporary media representations of French food more fully. What, for example, of the way in which cuisine appears on French television?

Nevertheless, *French Food* is a compelling read, and perhaps such questions can wait for a further volume.

Ben Taylor

Nottingham Trent University