

## IN BRIEF

### *Food*

**Jennifer Cognard-Black and Melissa A. Goldthwaite, editors**

**BOOKS THAT COOK**

The making of a literary meal

343pp. New York University Press. \$30.

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An observation made by Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor in *Books That Cook: The making of a literary meal* explains the broad appeal of this enjoyable collection of contemporary American writing about food: “Everybody eats!” As the anthology also shows, however, cooking and eating are shaped by society, culture and individual needs more than by simple nutrition. With a section for each course of a meal, accompanied by a brief history of the evolution of American taste by the editors, the book presents extracts from the most influential American cook books published between 1796 and 1982, as well as from recent novels, memoirs, poems and short stories, many of which include recipes. The whole can be read from start to finish or dipped into; in her introduction, Marion Nestle suggests that it might be used to create “literary meals”. Perhaps “Creamed Morels on Chive Butter Toast” to start, as offered to lovers in E. J. Levy’s essay, followed by “Turkey Bone Gumbo”, which Sara Roahen dishes up to remind herself of New Orleans. A side dish of Alice B. Toklas’s home-grown string beans could work well with the potato rösti that Laurie Colwin always turns to after one of the “repulsive dinners” she has endured over the years in other people’s homes. Kate Moses makes her heroine Sylvia Plath’s “Tomato Soup Cake”, conceding that it sounds a “more than unlikely” dessert.

A touching piece comes from Maya Angelou, whose memoir is interwoven with recipes. The “salty sweetness” of her grandmother’s Caramel Cake (“always to be spoken of in capital letters”) encapsulates the pain and pleasure of Angelou’s childhood. An elective mute

following sexual violence, the young Maya is slapped by a teacher for refusing to speak. When she gets home, Caramel Cake is waiting for her. “This cake can’t pay you for being slapped in the face”, Maya’s uncle says, but it can “tell you how much we love you”.

While the range of texts conveys the nation’s cultural diversity, consistent themes do emerge: food as comfort (for Norah Ephron, only mashed potato can mend a broken heart); as a sign of sympathy (as in Michael Lee West’s discussion of Southern funeral food), and a means of connecting with the dead, whose recipes we follow (Teresa Lust recreates the “scent of my grandmother’s house” by roasting a chicken); as protest (an extract on throwing whipped-cream pies at “bourgeois pigs” from *Recipes for Disaster: An anarchist cookbook* is helpful on this topic). Finally, as Shirley Geok-Lin Lim’s complex relationship with “Soy-Boiled Chicken Feet” shows, food is part of our identity whether we like it or not.

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