Bruno Laurioux. *Une histoire culinaire du Moyen Age* (Paris: Honoré Cham-

Pepper, ginger and saffron—these three ingredients are frequently found in
medieval recipes. But then, what about these recipes: was there a set of them
that was characteristic of the entire Middle Ages? What are the sources that tell
us about them? These are the kinds of question to which Bruno Laurioux tries
to provide answers in his *Histoire culinaire*. As he explains in his “Postface,” this
book is composed out of articles published earlier (p. 391), but that doesn’t
diminish the readability of the book, which is handily structured into three
overall themes. Part I treats of the available source material, part II of the
various types of food in use in the Middle Ages, while part III treats of varieties
in, and the evolution of, tastes.

Part I opens with an introduction, which addresses above all the current
state of knowledge with regard to the source material. There is a respectable
number of extant culinary texts: only from Western Europe, there are about
150 manuscripts from the period 1300-1500, single sources of which many are
still inedited. There is thus much work left to be done. Admittedly, these
manuscripts don’t furnish direct evidence of “wie es eigentlich gewesen ist in
der Küche.” But fortunately, historians don’t have to rely exclusively on recipe
books. There are other sources (p. 12), including bills, literary texts, menus,
lexicographic works, conversational exercises, satirical writings, proverbs and
archaeological findings. Incidentally, taken by themselves, the culinary manu-
scripts provide insufficient testimony of the heterogeneity of medieval cuisine.
Lourioux concludes part I with the observation that culinary history is still a
young discipline with much work still to be done, notably in the domains of
comparative and multidisciplinary research. His detailed bibliography (pp. 391ff)
shows, however, just how much has already been achieved in this discipline.

Of the four chapters of part I, the first testifies to the re-emergence, in the
Western Europe of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, of a body of culi-
nary literature, of which the earliest were authored by professional cooks. Chapter
2 describes the recipe book of Johannes of Bockenheim, the cook of Pope
Martin V, an edition of whose *Registrum Coquine* is appended, together with a
glossary translating the most important terms. It is worth mentioning here the
role of the Church calendar, as Johannes distinguished not only between reci-
pes for “fast days” and fast days, but also had a separate register for fish. In
other works, too, do we find particular sections offering fastday recipes. Laurioux
also discusses the influence of Apicius on medieval cuisine and what in some
European languages is called “kitchen Latin” (dog Latin).

Part II (pp. 155ff) takes us *in medias res*: its five chapters discuss various types
of food and of preparation, treating of such different things as the popularity
of pepper or the making of stuffings. We hear of the prominent role of cinn-
amon, ginger, saffron (also used as a dye), sugar and *graine de paradis*, the taste
of which seems to resemble cardamom, and further of clove and nutmeg, many
of which were first introduced as a consequence of the Crusades (ca. 1100-ca.
1300). However, some initially exotic and precious spices could over time ac-
quire a ‘vulgar’ reputation, as happened with pepper, which became marginalized
in aristocratic diets. Others were first introduced, or rather prescribed, because
of their reputed medical qualities. Others again were employed in the embalm-
ing of corpses, and Laurioux suspects that the proverbial odor of sanctity (odor sanctitatis) must have been that of spices. The author further embroiders his tale with a chapter-long discussion of spiced wines. His attention is furthermore attracted by the varieties of pasty foods—after all, potatoes were as yet unknown—and by the uses of wine and beer in England and on the Continent, not only for ordinary drinking, but also in recipes, as was the case in the addition of beer to the dough of apple beignets (p. 247)—a recipe, incidentally, that is still being used on New Year’s eve by the author of this review. The final chapter of part II deals with farciissage and provides a typology of the fillings and of the cavities, as it were, to which they were applied. Most famous are of course the tales of banquet dinners were entire orchestras were made to step out of giant pastries.

Part III, entitled “variations in taste,” deals with the range and evolution of tastes in the Middle Ages. One of the questions that is thrown up here has to do with the stipulated strong Arabic or Saracen influence, but Laurioux concludes that there was much less of it than has been assumed. The “Saracen soup,” for example, most certainly bears a misleading name, for it contains wine and bacon, ingredients that are anathema for a Muslim (pp. 308-9). However, the observed variety of regional cuisines renders it difficult to speak in general terms about the “medieval cuisine” tout court. A prominent example of variety (to this day, of course) is displayed on regional cheese platters, which are discussed in the last chapter of this book.

Maybe because of the character of his book as a collection of earlier articles, Laurioux did not deem it necessary to draw the various strands into a knot in a detailed conclusion. This is a pity, because the miserly two pages of his “Postface” with its commonplaces don’t do justice to the detailed contents of his book. May Laurioux really boast that “une société entière ... se révèle” in his fourteen chapters, considering that culinary history as practised by him must essentially remain a history of elites? This is not to say that Laurioux should have insisted, page after page, that the greatest part of the population was glad if they had anything to eat, but this proviso should have been made somewhere.

Overall, his chapters add up to a nice, very readable and well documented whole, which offers a pleasant combination of learned analysis and anecdotal evidence. The attached tables and maps profitably visualize a variety of aspects, although one misses illustrations. The bibliography of primary and secondary sources, of which the latter contains more than 500 titles, is awe-inspiring, even though the manner of referencing the literature in the footnotes by author name plus number is cumbersome, as it forces the reader constantly to jump to the general bibliography. Somewhat disappointing, too, is Laurioux’ neglect to translate unusual terms and phrases, and his limitation to an index ciborum, at the expense of a more user-friendly general index.

Petty Bange
Radboud University Nijmegen