



Scallops with seaweed butter
From *The Sportsman*

Cookery

On the wild side

Rose Prince

The terroir of the Kentish coast is faultlessly represented in *The Sportsman* (Phaidon, £29.95), a book of recipes from an acclaimed pub restaurant in the village of Seasalter, close to Whitstable. On the bill of fare (it's that English) you will find slip soles and thornback ray, salt marsh lamb and oysters, seaweeds of all sorts, wild berries, venison and much else from this landscape with its watery edge. The food is seasoned with home-panned sea salt and the kitchen churns its own butter.

The Sportsman's chef-proprietor, Stephen Harris, writes that terroir is a troublesome word that has come to mean too many things, especially with wine. The French have perhaps deliberately mystified it, he says. With food, terroir remains the best term to define how variations in landscape and climate in a place give a region a certain identity. This is aired strikingly, with Toby Glanville's photographs of the estuary and marshes, weald and orchards — a soothing greyness, an atmosphere of English Nordic to get you into the mood and cook Harris's recipes, mostly easy to

make: Try scallops in seaweed butter, crispy lamb breast with mint sauce or grilled plums with plum-stone ice cream.

Understanding local distinctiveness may be a code that British cooks are reviving, but it goes against our natural piratical culture only to eat the view. There have been curry houses in Britain since the turn of the 20th century, reveals Christoph Ribbat's *In the Restaurant: Society in Four Courses* (Pushkin Press, £16.99). This is the perfect book to buy anyone who loves to eat out. More than a history book, it is an insight into the underbelly of catered food, the lives of kitchen and waiting staff, of past elf 'n' safety-free kitchens more like slave ships, but also reforming, revolutionary restaurateurs in the world's great cities.

British waiters working in London's trattorias once spoke to customers in cod Italian accents, silver-serving spaghetti Bolognese. Now it's a case of which Italian region is not faithfully represented by a restaurant. Chefs and waiting staff are well-travelled, the customers want to cook the food at home and books on true Italian food provide the recipes. Food writer Anna del Conte is one of the best at *cucina regionale*, the doyenne even. Recipes in the new edition of her 1995 book, *Classic Food of Northern Italy* (Pavilion, £25), are typical of her ability to take original, historic dishes and make them feel fresh and modern.

This is cooking from above Italy's butter line, so plenty of grains — risotto rice, faro, buckwheat and emmer — along with cheeses, seafood, chestnuts, mushrooms and velvety coffee-flavoured puddings. Among its new-ancient dishes I am eating polenta taragna, buckwheat and cornmeal mashed with butter and cheese, Astrakhan for the stomach.

For enchantingly fragrant, earthy food from below Italy's tomato line there's Rachel Roddy's *Two Kitchens: Family Recipes From Sicily & Rome* (Headline, £25). Roddy has lived in both places, discovered a great variety of dishes and writes about them with joy and know-how. I'd like large helpings of her chicken with citrus and olives after a starter of pasta with cauliflower, anchovies, saffron, pinenuts

and raisins. The big Italian book of the year, incidentally, should have been *River Café 30* (Ebury, £28). It's more from Ruth Rogers and her team, in high-gloss packaging, but the recipes are, in contrast to the above books, overfamiliar and occasionally profligate. Not even a Lottery win would bring me to braise two kilograms of fillet of beef. Silverside, surely.

Olia Hercules's *Kaukasis* (Mitchell Beazley, £25) is a wonderful mix of regional history, family stories and astonishingly colourful recipes from Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. Recipes include quince halves stuffed with aromatic lamb; fried courgettes with a lovely yoghurt sauce called *matsoni*; and *dyushbara*, a dumpling broth not so quick to make, but soulfully good.

One of the best dishes I ate this year was a bone marrow curry in the Sri Lankan Soho restaurant Hoppers. Hoppers are Sri Lankan staples: dome-shaped rice flour

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and coconut milk pancakes, crunchy on one side. In their 'well' you might find a fried egg, sambal (hot chutney), toasted peanuts, fresh chilli or a curry. Hoppers's (the restaurant's) originator Emily Dobbs's book *Weligama* (Seven Dials, £25) is full of characterful recipes: cucumber curry, *gotu kola* salad (fresh herbs, grated coconut, onion and anchovies); fresh pickles aplenty and a sticky perfumed celebration sponge known as Love Cake. This is the book of the year for spice fans. No bone marrow curry in it, sadly, so it's back to Soho.

No bone marrow either in Michel Roux Jr.'s tribute to offal, *Les Abats: Recipes Celebrating the Whole Beast* (Seven Dials, £25) but pretty much everything extreme belonging to an animal is. Cooks need to be in safe hands with offal, never a problem with a Roux family member, so dive into the uncharted and try chicken liver gratin, the crispy feet of the same bird, hake throats *à pil pil* or a sweetbread and black pudding tart. A classic, bravely without images; but Roux's enthusiasm for his subject is enough.

Two good vegetable cookbooks are on my list: Ed Smith's useful *On the Side* (Bloomsbury, £20) respectfully addressing what to eat by a main course, from archetypal boulangère potatoes to original brassica dishes including a strange but mostly good yeasted cauliflower purée. California chef Jeremy Fox's *On Vegetables* (Phaidon, £29.95) takes edible plants to sophisticated altitudes, combining the unlikely into pretty, appetising plates. There's grilled artichoke with celery leaves and lemon, baked beetroots with hazelnuts and nectarine