This is a very prestigious and long-awaited book. It was initiated decades ago by Alan Davidson before being taken up by Tom Jaine, and it has grown substantially through the delays. It is a brilliant work of scholarship which makes available in translation Arab recipes from various sources dating back as far as the 10th century, while at the same time illuminating the development of Arab cuisines against a historical and sociological background.

There is something fascinating and moving about old historic recipes because they are an intimate link with the past. They reveal the sensuous quality, the tastes and smells and feel of worlds gone by. And they also tell us much about the past. In this book that reunites works by Maxime Rodinson, the late A.J Arberry and Charles Perry, each of the authors brings an insight into the medieval Islamic world through recipes of the time. Apart from Charles Perry's new translations which no-one has yet seen, their writings have long been of great interest and inspiration to academic scholars. They have been enormously valuable to me, and I am delighted that they are now accessible to the general public.

The Islamic world in the early Middle Ages was the Golden Age of a civilisation at its most glorious. It was more advanced and sophisticated than any European civilisation at the time, and the food - at least of the upper classes – was immensely rich and refined. Even by our tastes today, Medieval Arab dishes are far tastier than medieval European ones, and they relate to Middle Eastern dishes today in a way that medieval European ones do not to the cooking of the Western world. You can recognise in the old Arab dishes the roots of modern Arab dishes from Iran and Iraq, to Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, North Africa and elsewhere in the Middle East.

When I began researching Middle Eastern dishes in the early 1960s, there were no Egyptian cookery books and only a handful from other Middle Eastern countries. When I asked the librarian at the British Library to help me to find something about Arab cooking, he produced a list which contained nothing modern, but everything relating to medieval Arab gastronomy. One work was a 13th century culinary manual, the Kitab al Tabikh, translated by Professor Arberry, as '*A Baghdad Cookery Book'* in a 1939 edition of 'Islamic Culture'. It was the first medieval Arab manuscript ever to be translated. Another was a study in a 1949 edition of the French '*Revue Islamique'*, entitled '*Recherches sur les documents Arabes relatifs a la cuisine*' by Maxime Rodinson which included a sociological analysis

of a culinary manuscript of the same period in Damascus, the Kitab al Wusla il al Habib bi Wasfi t-tayyibati wa Tib. I was enthralled.

My excitement was partly due to a feeling of familiarity. I had been collecting Middle Eastern recipes from people for several years and many of the old recipes rang a bell. There were similar words, similar combinations of ingredients and flavourings, and similar descriptions of techniques to those I had been hearing. It was thrilling to trace the origins of dishes such as Tunisian and Moroccan ones to the Baghdad recipes translated by Arberry, and my own family's home cooking to those of medieval Syria described by Rodinson. For months I cooked medieval dishes and entertained friends to medieval banquets. It was very exciting. Because no quantities are given in the old recipes, and it is not possible to know exactly what the dominant flavours and the exact proportions of ingredients were in the past, I interpreted them according to my own taste, which was easy. In all traditional countries where recipes are passed down by word of mouth and where no one uses weighing machines, precise recipes are rarely given and people are accustomed to trusting their taste and using their common sense. In my original book I had included many of the recipes and I found, years later, that it had set a kind of fashion in medieval Arab banqueting in certain academic circles.

I was fascinated with the way Maxime Rodinson, as a young communist activist and Marxist sociologist, had used recipes to analyse and explain a society that existed more than seven hundred years ago. Anyone who knows my *A New Book of Middle Eastern Food* will have seen some of Rodinson's work, as I have made use of it heavily in the introductory chapters. Later, at the Oxford Symposium of Food I gave a talk on this subject, and it was subsequently published in '*Petits Propos Culinaires'*.

Professor Rodinson, one of the great old-guard left-wing French intellectuals, is a famous Orientalist and Islamist . He is all at once philosopher, historian, sociologist, ethnographer, and linguist as well as a great wit. I first met him through my cousin, the journalist and diplomat, Eric Rouleau, and have seen him regularly in Paris over the years. He was born in 1915 of Russian Jewish parents who migrated to France. His father, a worker in a Paris raincoat factory, was a communist trade union leader. Both parents were deported and died in Auschwitz. Maxime left school at 14 and worked for three years as a delivery boy in a transport company, during which time he taught himself Latin and Greek. At seventeen he persuaded his parents to support him through three years of study and

applied to L'Ecole des Langues Orientales which was the only place that did not require the baccalaureat (school-leaving exams). In 1936 he acquired diplomas in classical Arabic, Turkish, Ethiopian and the Maghrebi Arabic of Morocco. At the same time he studied history, philology and religions at L'ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes; and ethnology with Marcel Maus (nephew and collaborator of Durkhaim) at L'Ecole du Louvre. In 1937 he married, joined the communist party, and entered the CNRS (Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique).

When the war broke out in 1939 he was conscripted and sent to the then French-colonised Syria and Lebanon. In 1940 he was demobilised but stayed in Beirut, when the French colony sided with the Free French Gaulists and cut itself off from occupied France. His wife joined him with their first baby and two more children were born in Beirut. It was here, at the national library, that he found two old culinary manuscripts and decided to do a sociological analysis, because cooking was a subject that sociology had neglected.

I met Charles Perry in 1980 after one of his forays to Egypt and Syria where he studied yet more undiscovered culinary manuscripts. He is well known today to the gastronomic community interested in food history, a regular at food conferences and the Oxford Symposium, but back then he was a great surprise to me. Wearing a very traditional suit and exotic tie, he described, in a monotone delivery, his extraordinary findings. Recently he explained that he started wearing strange neckties when he was a journalist and editor of the rock-and-roll-magazine *Rolling Stone*, because rock musicians in the late sixties suspected journalists of working for the FBI or the CIA. He found that if he wore a strange necktie, he could get his interview done as they puzzled over it. These days a vast world-wide network of friends are on the lookout for unusual ones for him. Charles Perry's background is about as far from the Middle East as you can get. He was born in California, as were both his parents and all but one of his grandparents. His father was a salesman; his grandfather taught Latin at Los Angeles High School; his maternal grandmother, who died before he was born, was a script writer who headed the script department at MGM in the 1930s.

Charles is a linguist who possesses dictionaries and/or grammars of about 400 languages. Since his early teens, he was interested in linguistics and especially the Arabic language. He was drawn to the Arab world by the richness of the language which he started studying on his own when he was 15. He attended Princeton University, then transferred to the University of California, in Berkeley, where he obtained a bachelor's degree in Near

Eastern Languages. Part of the course was a year spent at the Middle East Centre for Arab Studies in Shimlan, Lebanon. This school (since relocated to Cairo) had been established in Jerusalem in the 1920s by the British Foreign Office at the urging of T.E. Lawrence to provide a place for Englishmen to study modern, as opposed to medieval Arabic. That was his introduction to Lebanese food and the beginning of his interest in gastronomy. During his year in Lebanon, he visited Egypt, Syria and Jordan, and since then he has travelled regularly in the Middle East, also visiting Turkey, Morocco, Yemen and Uzbekistan to discover their food. Besides linguistics, Charles uses political history (since many dishes have connections with the royal courts), and economic history (such as trade contacts) to place the dishes in their context.

Charles is particularly interested in the gastronomic aspect of the old recipes. He cooks all the dishes to better understand them. He once brought a food to be tasted at the Oxford Symposium. It was *kamakh rijal*, a cheese-like condiment made by leaving salted yoghurt out in the sun for several months. I called him once when I was in Los Angeles and found him preparing an Abbasid banquet. For many years he has been a food columnist and restaurant reviewer in Los Angeles where he has reviewed everything from tiny Vietnamese noodle shops and barbecues run by churches to the grandest California Cuisine restaurants.

Middle Eastern food is now fashionable and popular in the West. Special ingredients and ready-cooked dishes can be found in all the supermarkets. Ethnic restaurants are common while trendy chefs have integrated Levantine and North African dishes into their eclectic menus, and newspapers and magazines regularly feature recipes. Knowing something of the ancient background of a dish adds to the pleasure of cooking and eating. Although the recipes in the book represent a kind of gastronomic archaeology, they are recipes you can cook from. So do try them and use your taste to interpret them.