in Literary London, 1817,” as the subtitle tells us. The host was Benjamin Robert Haydon, the English history painter now overlooked but for his voluminous diary, autobiography, and drawings of friends. He gave this party to introduce the young and unknown John Keats to the elder poet William Wordsworth, who was visiting London from the Lake District. Among other guests were the essayist Charles Lamb and the explorer Joseph Ritchie, who soon after embarked on an ill-fated expedition to Africa to discover the source of the Niger. Whatever his faults of character, Haydon recognized the rare intellectual and artistic gifts of his friends.

Haydon’s literary party was filled with wit, humor, and conversation so brilliant that after the guests left, he spent the rest of the night writing it down in his diary. Hughes-Hallett gives us his fresh record, balanced with excerpts from letters, memoirs, and accounts of the guests and contemporaries. Her book meanders in a discursive, loosely thematic structure. She provides portraits of the host and guests (especially those marked with genius), not just their situation in life but also their physical characteristics, dress, and fashions, even their speech patterns and accents. She describes them on their routes to the party, walking across the changing topography of London; the weather that afternoon of December 28th, during a period of strange climatic conditions due to volcanic disruptions; the poverty en route resulting from unstable political conditions, and so on. She goes into all this in such detail that the reader wonders about her direction, but in due course she gets the guests to their destination.

Haydon’s dinner party was for gentlemen, and although he did not write down the menu, he described their conversation and jokes at the center of this literary evening. Nevertheless, Hughes-Hallett sets forth some of the dishes, wines, and spirits the host might have offered, given its setting in his painting room (he avoided the newer word “studio”). Guests were undoubtedly served two main courses with an assortment of dishes laid out, followed by desserts. Given his social standing and income as an artist, Haydon would not have adopted the sequential style, à la russe, that was newly fashionable and more lavish.

Many of us think back fondly on an exceptionally good dinner party we once gave. In such a way The Immortal Dinner depicts “A Famous Evening of Genius & Laughter in Literary London, 1817,” as the subtitle tells us. The host was Benjamin Robert Haydon, the English history painter now overlooked but for his voluminous diary, autobiography, and drawings of friends. He gave this party to introduce the young and unknown John Keats to the elder poet William Wordsworth, who was visiting London from the Lake District. Among other guests were the essayist Charles Lamb and the explorer Joseph Ritchie, who soon after embarked on an ill-fated expedition to Africa to discover the source of the Niger. Whatever his faults of character, Haydon recognized the rare intellectual and artistic gifts of his friends.

Haydon’s literary party was filled with wit, humor, and conversation so brilliant that after the guests left, he spent the rest of the night writing it down in his diary. Hughes-Hallett gives us his fresh record, balanced with excerpts from letters, memoirs, and accounts of the guests and contemporaries. Her book meanders in a discursive, loosely thematic structure. She provides portraits of the host and guests (especially those marked with genius), not just their situation in life but also their physical characteristics, dress, and fashions, even their speech patterns and accents. She describes them on their routes to the party, walking across the changing topography of London; the weather that afternoon of December 28th, during a period of strange climatic conditions due to volcanic disruptions; the poverty en route resulting from unstable political conditions, and so on. She goes into all this in such detail that the reader wonders about her direction, but in due course she gets the guests to their destination.

Haydon’s dinner party was for gentlemen, and although he did not write down the menu, he described their conversation and jokes at the center of this literary evening. Nevertheless, Hughes-Hallett sets forth some of the dishes, wines, and spirits the host might have offered, given its setting in his painting room (he avoided the newer word “studio”). Guests were undoubtedly served two main courses with an assortment of dishes laid out, followed by desserts. Given his social standing and income as an artist, Haydon would not have adopted the sequential style, à la russe, that was newly fashionable and more lavish.
Hughes-Hallett reveals the food preferences of some of the guests and their consideration of matters gastronomic. Wordsworth ate plain oatmeal and porridges that suited his frugal means and kept his focus on poetry. Keats, only twenty-one and a medical student, ignored food but wrote effusively to his brother about his love of claret. As the gourmet among them, Lamb delighted in the sensuous experience of eating. Hughes-Hallett recounts passages in Lamb’s essays and letters where he describes favorite dishes, not just the familiar “Dissertation on Roast Pig” and “Grace before Meat,” but others of humor and charm. In a letter to Joseph Hume, Lamb explained why he preferred to spell “plumb” pudding with the final “b,” a dish likely served at Haydon’s, so soon after Christmas: “I think it reads fatter and more suetty.” Lest modern fat-phobic readers misunderstand, Hughes-Hallett puts in perspective Lamb’s pleasure in gastronomy by depicting life with his sister Mary as fraught with worry, the specter of his earlier breakdown, and the family tragedy of mental illness.

For the culinary and social historian, the author gives information on meal times, diet fads, (bad) table manners, and more, usually from contemporary accounts. I would have welcomed more on provisions and marketing, transportation and agriculture, wine and shipping. I wonder about the linens and table decoration, the china, silverware, and glass. Who might have prepared and washed up the meal, with what equipment, and what did it cost? Hughes-Hallett writes about dishes but mentions no contemporary cookbooks, English or French. What were the womenfolk doing and eating while the gentlemen dined thus?

If this seems like too much to ask, on other subjects Hughes-Hallett goes far and fascinatingly afield, such as Haydon’s difficulties with patronage for his grand—often grandiose—artistic ambitions, Lord Elgin’s acquisition of his marbles, Sir Isaac Newton’s study of optics and the rainbow, medical education and grave robbing, African exploration and the slave trade. Sometimes these and other topics, always interesting and full of detail, seem like tangents. Given the extent and quality of recent work in culinary history, more on the meal, too, would have helped fill in the background to Haydon’s gathering.

Haydon cherished the memory of his “immortal” party. Later on in a life of disappointment, debt, and dashed ambitions that ended in suicide, he sometimes reread his account of those sparkling hours. It remained a high point of his experience, captured in his diary for himself and for us. Using many different perspectives, Hughes-Hallett gives us a complex and fascinating portrait of a specific party and, at the same time, of a culture and an age.


Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies and Gender Issues 5 (Fall, 2002) Special Issue on “Gender, Food, and Survival”
Edited by Norma Baumel Joseph
270 pp. $15.00 (paper)

Norma Joseph and the Hadassah International Research Institute on Jewish Women at Brandeis University deserve the thanks of food studies scholars, as well as those involved in the study of Jewish culture. “Gender, Food, and Survival” offers readers a wide range of articles that demonstrate with clarity—as if it actually needed to be proven—that food matters. The seven pieces here, plus Norma Joseph’s brief but analytically sharp introduction, span a wide range of...
times and places. From an ethnohistorical exploration of bread baking in the ancient Near East, through late nineteenth-century German-Jewish forays into the world of “eating out,” and ending with a number of contemporary American studies that in themselves examine diverse topics, this special issue goes far and wide.

The Jews who cook and eat in the pages of this journal engaged with food not just in the three aforementioned places and times, but also in Mexico and Russia. Likewise, an essay on Christian women’s adaptation of the Passover seder ritual demonstrates the breadth of vision that informs this volume and shows persuasively the many ways in which Jewish food has taken on meaning beyond the boundaries of the Jewish world. This collection of essays focuses on what the editor describes as “the multiplicity and diversity of edible Judaism” (p. 11). Joseph’s introduction, like all the essays included here, performs a valuable service by demonstrating how little meaning the categories of “public” and “private” have when dealing with Jewish life and when thinking about food.

Little of what has conventionally been considered the realm of Jewish “food studies” appears in this book. Not only do Christian feminists merit an essay of their own, but food here is a source not just of warmth, comfort, and the mnemonics of childhood. Food here also functions in different essays and in varying degrees as a source of power, conflict, intra-communal disputes, and as a painful issue on the rocky road of emancipation. While Joseph, in her introduction, makes the very important point that the survival of group identity hinges in large measure on food and food culture, she has chosen a set of essays that extend beyond survival.

It is to the credit of the editor and to the Hadassah Institute that they did not opt for a conventional definition of what food meant in the context of Jewish women’s lives. As in many fields, the study of food has in Jewish studies long been linked to women. Most scholars who have been interested in the history of Jewish food and the impact of, for example, dietary laws (kashrut) on everyday life have tended to come to it from an interest in women’s history. Indeed, many have been women scholars of the Jewish experience who have used food as their own special point of entry into the larger field. Yet in this volume, endorsed as it were by a research institute devoted primarily to studying Jewish women (and sponsored by one of the oldest and most powerful Jewish women’s organizations in modern times), men show up in a number of these essays as individuals with a real stake in the food process. Jewish men, historically, understood that food meant more than just calories or something of concern to women.

The essays, as in any collection, are uneven. Probably the strongest and most analytically dense is Carol Meyers’s “Having Their Space and Eating There Too: Bread Production and Female Power in Ancient Israelite Households.” The mix of ethnography, archaeology, and biblical analysis makes the essay dense and complicated, yet at the same time, the topic has clear boundaries. It likewise demonstrates how food studies at their best force one into dealing with material culture. Similarly, Ruth Abusch-Magder’s “Eating ‘Out’: Food and Boundaries of Jewish Community and Home in Germany and the United States” (which is stronger on the German than the American part) pushes readers to see the centrality of food to the long process of emancipation that consumed the energy and attention of Jews in the nineteenth century. Long posited as a male experience, emancipation as portrayed by Abusch-Magder became a women’s concern as well, since it had all sorts of ramifications about food.

All of the essays here make a contribution to two fields. To the field of food studies, they demonstrate that ethnicity and religion must be factored in, while from the perspective of Jewish studies, Norma Joseph has collected a series of essays that should convince practitioners that without food, the history and culture of the Jewish people cannot be understood.

—Hasia R. Diner, New York University

_Milk of Almonds: Italian American Women Writers on Food and Culture_
Edited by Louise DeSalvo and Edvige Giunta
348 pp. $26.95 (cloth)

This collection’s focus on Italian-American women is a much-needed contribution to the growing number of books on women and food. Aiming to present “both a piercing critique and loving celebration of Italian American culture” (p. 3), DeSalvo and Giunta have selected pieces that explore the contradiction Italian-American women face of gaining sustenance from a patriarchal culture that denigrates them. The ninety autobiographical narratives, stories, and poems complicate ethnicity and gender, often intersecting them with class and sexuality.

Early feminist writers ignored the topic of women and food for understandable reasons, as wrongheaded as they may have been. Struggling to get women out of the kitchen, second-wave feminists considered any discussion of women and cooking to be at cross purposes with liberation. Writing about Italian-American women and food presents similar
The authors in this collection have to contend with stereotypical images of the Italian woman—the mama stirring her sauce and overseeing the loud but loving and happy family that is the center of her life. For the most part, by contextualizing Italian-American women’s lives and breaking the “principle of silence” in Italian-American culture, the writers in Milk of Almonds achieve what the editors call a “drastic revision and redefinition of what it means to be an Italian American…” (p.13). Not all of these women cook. Not all of them nurture. Not all of the families are warm and loving, but they are steeped in Italian history and culture, in the poverty and oppression that brought many of their ancestors to these shores a century ago. Noting her grandparents’ “fifteenth-century Southern Italian customs,” Joanna Clapps Herman describes a family that “grew up with screaming and violence” (p.228). Her female relatives exhausted themselves to fulfill the impossible expectations of their fathers and husbands, while never taking credit for their accomplishments. Relaxing only when they served each other “coffee and” (a sweet snack), the women sometimes broke the wall of denial about infidelity and abuse.

Many other authors also expose the violence of fathers or grandfathers, but this experience is often complicated by expressions of caring, moments of love. Camilla Trinchieri’s “Kitchen Communion” opens with the line, “Mama has been cooking for a solid week.” The family’s three grown children are brought back together only by the death of their father, and Trinchieri wonders if her mother “is weighing us down, hoping she can anchor us to this house, bring us back to filial duty, to respect, maybe even back to loving our father” (p.49). We learn that her father was physically abusive to his sons and left his wife suddenly, returning one day as if he had never gone. Refusing to learn to cook—perhaps to escape her mother’s fate of being tied to a cruel husband—Trinchieri, unlike her brothers and mother, denies neither the abuse nor the good times she had with her father.

The feminist theme of women denied lives outside of their families is explored with an Italian accent. In “Secret Garden,” a poem about the death of a mother, Janet Zandy writes about the mother’s scarf. The daughter sees its softness as a contrast to the harshness of her mother’s life—endless caring for others without appreciation. Her mother comes to her in a dream, saying “I had a life,” giving her the scarf and complicating the picture. Mary Saracino’s story, “Smoke and Fire,” is also told from the perspective of a child whose mother is unable to cope either with her many children or her husband’s violence. Dorothy Barresi’s poem, “The Prodigal Daughter,” points out that daughters cannot be prodigal because they cannot leave home.

The pain and loss of assimilation and the strategies women use to incorporate their ethnicity into their lives is another recurrent theme. Maria Mazziotti Gillian describes a family Easter dinner with no need for the extra chairs once required by her children and extended family. She worries about all she has lost—that she has finally become an American—but finds a part of her Italian self in her granddaughter Caroline, with whom she shares being loud and loving bread. While asserting her own ethnicity as an Italian and a Jew, Pamela Barnett warns against appeals to “blood,” which she calls “culture’s most dangerous fiction” (p.142), dividing us from each other and making genocide possible.

The contradictions in this volume are captured so well in the title. Extracting milk from the hard almond seems impossible, but with enormous work—done by women, of course—it is not only possible but can be transformative. The first to flower in the Mediterranean spring, the almond tree symbolizes rebirth, but the editors also point out that while the blossoms may signal an end to winter, spring can also be a time when provisions are exhausted and people are in danger of starving before the tree bears fruit.

There is so much in this collection—celebrations of meals and particular foods such as artichokes, figs, ravioli, baked ziti, broccoli rabe, bread, and fried rabbit. The authors explore food and sex, food and relationships, and cooking as artistry. Some of the essays do fall into nostalgia and sentimentalizing, while others essentialize women—an essay on the perfection of breast milk opens the collection. Still others present women as victimized, ignoring their ethnicity. The editors’ review of the literature in the introduction is puzzling. While they address some of the work done on ethnicity and food, eating disorders, sexual abuse, and ethnicity, they neglect the growing body of literature that combines food studies with women’s studies.

Milk of Almonds is definitely worth reading, but be sure to have something to eat in the house, because this collection will stimulate both your mind and your appetite.

—Arlene Avakian, University of Massachusetts
University Press described it to me as “a scholarly Fast Food Nation.” What a good idea, I thought. Eric Schlosser’s bestseller, while justly celebrated as a masterwork of investigative journalism and cultural intervention, does not pretend to present a methodic ethnography and theory of fast food.

Regrettably, notwithstanding some discerning observations, neither does Kincheloe’s book. At its best, Sign of the Burger delivers on its author’s promise to make known the methods by which “McDonald’s and other corporate meaning-makers market a world where the unfettered free enterprise system produces nothing but freedom and satisfaction for consumer citizens” (p.49).

Kincheloe shows how it came about that shortcomings in the nutritional quality of McDonald’s products and the pay and working conditions the company accords its workers disappear in a physical landscape dotted with clean and comfortable restaurants, and a media environment of ads depicting harmonious families supping on Happy Meals.

Erased as well is the suffering effected by three decades of disinvestment in public services. “Why should we worry about sick children when we have Ronald McDonald Houses?” Kincheloe writes. “Why should we worry about children having parks to play in when we have McPlaygrounds at the outlets?” (p.187)

Kincheloe is at his most insightful while discussing the “generative codes” through which McDonald’s achieves those erasures; how, for example, the company manages to market the cleanliness of the restaurants and the store owners who began as burger flippers as democratic access to high culture. Relatively few pages are devoted to that sort of detail, however. Much of the book consists of familiar claims about the pervasiveness of corporate influence, dressed up in jargon from cultural studies, postmodernism, and critical theory. McDonald’s engages in a “cultural pedagogy” that produces “disciplined subjects” who view consumption as the solution to all problems and any criticism of McDonald’s as an attack on their own “colonized desires” and “commodified identity,” Kincheloe tells us at great length.

The word “hegemonic” appears seven times in the space of two pages, but real people are nowhere to be found in much of the book. Kincheloe conducted ethnographic interviews with McDonald’s customers over a period of about a dozen years, but rather than learn from those with whom he spoke, he dismisses them as dupes. The few excerpts he includes from the interviews make clear that these customers believe that McDonald’s is neither as powerful, conspiratorial, nor injurious as he suggests. A woman who works swing shifts talked to him, for example, about how the affordability and convenience of McDonald’s were a godsend to her and her son after her husband left them. Instead of trying to understand his interviewees’ relationships to McDonald’s, Kincheloe complains that they “miss the occluded and complex nature of power” (p.48) and wrongly accuse him of “looking down on them, their politics, their aesthetics, and their eating habits” (p.55).

But in point of fact, Kincheloe does have an overdetermined view of McDonald’s. At one point he actually suggests that McDonald’s is responsible for Japanese children losing their facility with chopsticks. And Kincheloe lacks appreciation for the many reasons many people look forward to their next Extra Value Meal. Unlike Eric Schlosser, who devotes a chapter to why the French fries taste so good, Kinchelow evidences no grasp of the pleasures of fast food.

—Barry Glassner, University of Southern California

Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth-Century America
Steven Stoll
New York: Hill and Wang, 2002
287 pp. $30.00 (cloth)

Larding the Lean Earth is about the ethic of permanence in nineteenth-century America. In a fascinating tale, environmental historian Steven Stoll tells of the short span of years—circa 1820–1850—when ecologically benign agriculture became synonymous with progress. At the center of the tale is the place “between what farmers could control and what they could not, between plants and animals on the one hand and geology and climate on the other” (p.15).

Stoll’s narrative pits those who believed that permanence was the key to prosperity versus those who believed that prosperity could be unlocked through westward emigration. Stoll points out the ecological differences between the two philosophies. Permanent settlement means ecological limits. “Soil is a bank account for fertility that farmers draw on,” says Stoll, “and the balance is always low” (p.19). New land, on the other hand, has the (often unrealized) potential of a fresh bank of nutrients. But as Stoll shows in an insightful piece of historical investigation, as people emigrated to new land, it was eroded and exhausted. Moving on was a way to prosper, draining the land of goodness before departing to the next patch. Waste, says Stoll, was democratic.

Observing this “land killing,” a set of farmers with “fortunes somewhere above middling” (p.28) were coming up
with a solution: staying put and improving the soil already under cultivation. These so-called “improvers” believed that soil was the basis of national wealth and thus required “restorative husbandry” to overcome the limits imposed by dwindling fertility. Under improvement, soil could be cultivated in the most prosperous possible way over the longest possible time, and then passed into the hands of future generations. Permanence was paramount to improvement.

Yet the less wealthy and the landless, the people with nothing to pass onto their children, continued to emigrate to the interior and the West. For improvers, such emigration was foolhardy. Inland expansion led not only to the impoverishment of the soil, but to social decline and the “debasement of the American nation” (p. 93). Permanence, conversely, reflected a virtuous commitment to rural life. Emigration meant something else, too: the loss of cheap landless workers, whose availability meant more profit for the landed farmers, and whose movement was a political threat. So the “philosophy of permanence created a countryside of exclusion” (p. 91).

Stoll exemplifies his argument using detailed historical case studies from Pennsylvania and South Carolina. Drawing on agricultural practices of these regions—the use of barns, the role of cattle, sheep, and animal dung, slavery and calcium, he shows how improvers used techniques to cycle nutrients effectively though the soil—and how they were driven by politics and economics.

As an ethic and practice, improvement collapsed in the 1850s. Stoll bemoans its passing, the passing of a time when agricultural practices rectified farming with ecology. Given the current state of industrial agriculture, it’s easy to understand this nostalgia, despite the social conservatism of its proponents. But Stoll should have dealt with this paradox more fully; politically, he should have said something more.

Larding the Lean Earth is best when it weaves together historical narrative with soil science, economic and political analysis with agricultural knowledge. It roots agriculture in the context of the ideas of the prevailing time and in ecological change. This is refreshing. It is a shame, though, that the book is rather overwritten, making it a struggle to get through. Still, the history of improvement warrants both an audience and a debate. I sincerely hope Stoll’s efforts achieve the former and prompt the latter.

—Corinna Hawkes, Ph.D., Food policy consultant, New York, NY

Fatal Harvest: The Tragedy of Industrial Agriculture
Edited by Andrew Kimbrell
xi + 354 pp. Illustrations. $45.00 (paper)

The Fatal Harvest Reader:
The Tragedy of Industrial Agriculture
Edited by Andrew Kimbrell
xiv + 369 pp. $16.95 (paper)
This smaller-format version lacks illustrations and many of the editor’s essays. It contains one essay on food security that does not appear in the more comprehensive version.

According to the book jacket, Fatal Harvest “is designed to be an invaluable aid to the activists, farmers, policy makers, and consumers fighting for a more sustainable food system.” Andrew Kimbrell, Director of The Center for Food Safety in Washington, DC, has compiled his own essays and those of thirty-three other contributors in an oversized (12” x 12”) “exhibit format” book. About one-quarter of the essays, dating from 1985 to the present, have been previously published. The book is generously illustrated with large color photographs, which offer a compelling way to compare industrial agriculture to a more natural approach to farming. The editor has created an iconography of “Industrial Eye” versus “Agrarian Eye” that pairs contrasting photos and highlights information from the text. However, the multiple authorship and repeated abstracts from the text lead to considerable redundancy.

That said, the book covers a tremendous amount of information, and much of it should make you think twice about what you are eating. Seven myths of industrial agriculture, such as its cheapness and efficiency, are challenged. A major theme of Fatal Harvest is the damage that industrial agriculture is doing to the natural world, and why that matters. The book includes photographs of varieties of fruits and vegetables that most people have never seen, the survivors of mass extinctions caused by monoculture agriculture.

Eighty to 90 percent of tomato, lettuce, corn, and apple varieties have been lost since the beginning of the twentieth century. This loss is of particular concern because these strains may have contained disease- and pest-resistance genes. Fatal Harvest examines how specific plants are grown industrially and highlights problems in pesticide and fertilizer use, soil erosion, labor abuses, and abuse of the political process. It shows how pesticides are causing significant damage to human health. The production of nitrogen fertilizer requires considerable use of fossil fuels, and the use of nitrogenous
fertilizer causes a breakdown of soil ecology, leading to greater dependence on added nitrogen and harmful nitrogen runoff into our water supplies. Green Revolution hybrid grains are so specialized for seed production that they are no longer proficient at feeding themselves, and are thus fertilizer-dependent. In this era of global destabilization caused by our dependence on oil, one should take note of the fact that industrial agriculture uses 10 calories of fossil fuel to produce a single food calorie. If the additional calories used to transport the food are counted, the fossil fuel calories consumed are considerably higher.

Another under-appreciated hazard is that very large farms are not just taking up more space and destroying farm communities, but they also have fewer edges, and thus fewer places where wildlife is tolerated. Some farms are experiencing pollinator shortages due to indiscriminate killing by pesticides. The contributors also raise concerns about food engineering, seed patenting, food irradiation, and US and world policies that have favored the corporate takeover of food. Those who enjoy produce from California should note that agriculture accounts for 85 percent of the state’s water use—and much of that water is not being replenished. Fatal Harvest closes with suggestions for viable alternatives to industrial agriculture, as well as steps that individuals can take to help reshape agriculture.

My chief criticism of this volume is that it fails to footnote references to all of its facts and assertions. There is a list of selected references and readings, but it would be hard work to determine the source of most of the information presented. As a scientist, I do not trust a “fact” unless I can see where it came from. Although fact-checkers were employed, in the chapter on genetically engineered food, which I am best qualified to evaluate, I found problems. This essay may be the weakest in the volume, with many misrepresentations and one blatant error. The author, Joseph Mendelson, claims that a controversial study published by Drs. Pusztai and Ewen used potatoes containing the Bacillus thuringiensis (Bt) gene, when in fact they used potatoes containing the Galanthus nivalis agglutinin (GNA) gene. Although this does not change the study’s conclusion of potential harm from genetically engineered food, it would alarm anyone who knows that Bt is in common use, and it suggests that Mendelson failed to use primary references. Mendelson also raises old concerns about antibiotic-resistant genes in plants, which scientists have discredited and which are dwarfed by the problem of excessive use of antibiotics in industrial animal farming. The lack of discussion of animal farming is a glaring omission in the book, especially since a photo essay on an “animal factory farm” would be quite impressive.

Despite these criticisms, Fatal Harvest brings together important information, and if you are complacent about your food, you should read it. I would, however, urge those who are trying to change the system to use a scientific approach, or risk losing credibility.

—Lee Venolia, Ph.D., Williamstown, MA

Salt: White Gold of the Ancient Maya
Heather McKillop
xxii + 222 pgs. Illustrations. $55.00 (cloth)

Heather McKillop sets herself a challenge: how to use archaeological methods to elucidate practices surrounding a food that generally goes overlooked. Adding to her difficulties, the evidence she seeks today lies underwater, thereby “rendered invisible to modern archeological searches on dry land” (pp. 4, 29, 170).

Despite these obstacles, McKillop pieces together the quotidian practices of salt production among the Maya of the Late Classic Period in the lowlands of present-day Guatemala and coastal Belize (ca. A.D. 600–900). Archaeologists and Mayanists will appreciate her attention to details concerning ceramic types and analyses of archaeological data.

One of McKillop’s central questions is where the Late Classic Maya acquired their salt. McKillop supports the view that during this period salt was largely produced in what is now coastal Belize, utilizing the sal cocida (cooked salt) method, whereby salty sea or lagoon water is passed through salty soils to increase its salt concentration, and then boiled dry (pp. 15, 22–23, 51, 92–93, 133, 175). The sal cocida method has been documented at inland sites, but coastal sites that were later flooded had, until recently, been overlooked. This led many to underestimate the importance of this method, and to overemphasize the importance of the evaporation method (solar) of salt production that might have been used on the northern Yucatan peninsula.

McKillop also rightly points out that the additional labor needed for the sal cocida method would not have prevented its use if salt production were conducted when the need for agricultural labor was low (pp. 18–25). In addition, from the limited number of ceramic types, the lack of tools not related to salt production, and the absence of human remains she concludes that these now-flooded coastal sites were seasonal and specialized “work shops” rather than part of household production within inhabited communities (pp. 52, 112–114, 124–134).
McKillop also presents evidence that coastal lagoons in the region that were suitable for obtaining salt through solar evaporation were flooded earlier, and presumably caused greater dependence in the Late Classic on areas inland. The examination of this evidence leads to a much-needed reevaluation of Maya inland-coastal trade networks.

This book will undoubtedly appeal to the specialist, but it may appear too detail-oriented for the generalist looking to learn about the role of salt in Ancient Maya society. Chapters Two and Three outline the excavations at three underwater sites in the Punta Yacacos Lagoon on the southern coast of Belize and include photographs, site drawings, and detailed analyses of the ceramics uncovered. The drawings are well done, but the photographs add little to readers’ understanding of McKillop’s research. In Chapter Five McKillop addresses the geologic and ecological processes by which the archeological sites she examined came to be inundated beginning 18,000 B.P.

Unfortunately, this extensive commentary adds little to her discussion of the role of salt and its production, exchange, and consumption in Ancient Maya society. The author herself acknowledges that finding material evidence for salt production is easier than uncovering evidence about how salt was consumed (p.16). However, one wishes that she had discussed more ethnohistorical accounts—in part because the ones she does include, such as ethnographic descriptions of salt production methods, are so compelling in light of her original research.

While McKillop proposes that salt might have been desirable in the context of Maya feasting, and that a “taste” for salt might have increased its consumption (pp.16–19), she presents very little about salt consumption. Her brief discussion on this topic focuses largely on the biological necessity of salt. In short, this book fails to address the social valuing of salt implied by its title as a central theme.

—Clare Sammells, University of Chicago

Consuming Passions and Patterns of Consumption
Edited by Preston Miracle and Nicky Milner
Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2002
Distributed by Oxbow Books
vi + 136 pp.  Illustrations.  $35.00 (cloth)

This wonderful volume captures the essence of a conference on “Consuming Passions and Patterns of Consumption” that was held in 1997 at the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research and Department of Archaeology at the University of Cambridge. Archaeologists can certainly be described as having a fixation with garbage. Most of what is discovered at archaeological sites has been discarded, and much of that was food. Therefore, it is always a surprise to realize how little attention, until recently, was devoted to the study of food and cuisine. Much has changed in recent years, both in analytical technology and research emphasis. Archaeology is an interdisciplinary science, and the contributors to this volume make full use in their analyses of a wide range of scientific applications, archival and ethnographic data, and new theoretical approaches. There are fourteen contributors to the ten chapters and conclusion, with each chapter representing a different researcher (or researchers) and project. While definitely a technical volume, it is well and clearly written and would be intriguing to those seriously interested in the study of ancient food and feasting. There is no common time period, research design, or location in the projects discussed; the connection between these papers is the examination of the archaeological record and the reconstruction of past cuisines through food remains.

Space does not allow a comprehensive review of each of the chapters, so I have elected a more in-depth look at two examples. “The Distribution of Meat in a Hierarchical Society: The Irish Evidence” by Finbar McCormick (pp.25–32) is an exploration of the societal and practical implications of butchering whole carcasses of cattle and the hypothesis that the butchered pieces were distributed according to social standing. Preservation of large carcasses was problematic at best, and feasts were one way to consume quantities of meat while they were still edible. McCormick uses references to early feasts in literature, particularly twelfth- and fourteenth-century feast descriptions, which specifically identify individuals by rank and corresponding cut of meat. I was enchanted that the buffoons and chess players both got shanks, and the queen got a rump steak. There is a discussion of additional evidence from ethnographic sources about meat distribution among hunter-gatherers. McCormick then compares animal bones recovered from several archaeological sites with these
written descriptions to support his analysis of population, their rank, and evidence for feasting.

“Oysters, Cockles and Kitchenmiddens” by Nicky Milner (pp.89–96) explores several theories at several sites, all of which have kitchen middens. Kitchen middens are refuse piles that can contain all types of artifacts, but generally all are food-related, such as animal bones and other materials, including, in many cases, shells. Some middens are primarily composed of shell and can actually look like small mounds. Nicky Milner discusses a range of middens, which date to at least six thousand years ago. This period is of particular interest, as it can indicate the transition from a hunting and gathering society to an agriculture one. The kitchenmiddens contained a wide range of mollusks, including oysters, cockles, and mussels. Milner utilizes ethnographic comparisons and new scientific techniques, including the analysis of oyster shells, whose formation can reveal paleo-environmental data since climatic changes can affect shell growth. She reviews the evidence for the methods and gender of the gatherers and the life cycle and habitat of the mollusks, all hypothesized from the archaeological evidence. In attempting to understand how oysters in particular were prepared for consumption, Milner considered and then compared various methods to the actual archaeological evidence. For example, she discusses boiling, which would require a container when pottery, if available at all, was very limited; and roasting, which could cook a large quantity at one time and relatively quickly. With a few modifications, direct steaming, possibly with seaweed, would also be effective. These methods have the advantage of opening the shell; once extracted, the mollusks could be dried and/or smoked for future use. A large firepit that was reused periodically is thought to indicate cyclical feasting. Milner’s analysis of midden composition also indicates a change in eating habits over time. Her conclusions illuminate life millennia ago. It is possible that the availability of the mollusks, particularly the oyster, slowed the transition to agriculture by providing sustenance during the spring period of extreme food scarcity. However, either over-harvesting or a change in salinity levels (or both) is thought to have jeopardized food security and eventually pushed the culture onto the path of agriculture.

This synopsis of two of the contributions to this wonderful and clearly written volume will, I hope, be sufficiently tantalizing to encourage readers to enjoy a unique window on the foods and feasts of so very long ago.

—Daphne Derven, CPRA: The American Center for Wine, Food and the Arts

Peanuts: The Illustrious History of the Goober Pea
Andrew F. Smith
Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002
xx + 234 pp. Illustrations. $29.95 (cloth)

I often use peanuts in cooking. They can be blanched, roasted, ground, pureed, or candied; they add flavor, texture, and depth. From pad thai to chicken curry, peanuts make an appearance in the foodways of many cultures, but we Americans hold a special place for them in our hearts. We eat peanuts on airplanes, sing about them during baseball games, and watch a peanut with arms and legs, in a top hat and monocle, sell its wares on television. Why is peanut butter such a common household food? How did peanuts become the snack of choice at the circus? Why did the inventor of Cracker Jacks use peanuts instead of cashews or almonds?

In Peanuts: The Illustrious History of the Goober Pea, part of the University of Illinois Press’s food series, Andrew Smith sets out to answer these questions and more. He traces the origin of the peanut from its first European encounter to its growth in the United States, attempting to show how and why the peanut became an American icon. As in his other food series books (The Tomato in America, Pure Ketchup, and Popped Culture), Smith’s ultimate goal is to determine “…how they [tomato soup, ketchup, popcorn, and now peanuts] came to be part of our culinary landscape, how their history reflects and influences broader historical trends, and what these products can tell us about ourselves as Americans” (p.xvi). In Peanuts he focuses on the culinary history and social and cultural traditions of the peanut.

Smith begins by describing the story of the peanut as “…action-packed, peopled with Amerindians and African Americans, Italian Americans and Greek Americans, entrepreneurial vendors and captains of industry, grocers and scientists, efficiency-conscious processors and managers, commercial artists and hard-hitting advertisers, health food nuts and anti-nut food allergists, and kids of all ages” (pp.xvi–xvii). He tells the reader that the peanut’s transformation from a “…slave food to a mainstream staple is a nutty tale filled with unexpected twists and turns” (p.xvi). Although the tale is not entirely “nutty,” the reader does walk away with a greater sense of American history and the peanut’s role within it.

The first two chapters trace from 1502 the European colonies’ first encounter with the peanut and its subsequent arrival in the United States through slave trading. Smith then fast-forwards to the 1800s to discuss the rise of the peanut.
Status becomes an important theme from this point on, weaving its way through the remaining chapters as he touches upon various social media, including the circus and literature, to illustrate the peanut’s integration into American culture.

With this integration, new products were created. Chapter Four, “Doctors and Vegetarians,” is devoted entirely to peanut butter. Smith describes its invention and transformation into a common household product in the 1900s, then jumps back to the 1800s to discuss peanut street vendors and peanut manufacturing. It is at this point in the book that the reader begins to understand how peanuts evolved into a snack food.

I found Chapters Six and Seven, “Soup to Oil Nuts” and “Sweet and Nutty,” to be the most interesting, because it is here that Smith focuses on peanut cookery. His tone is livelier throughout these sections as he becomes an animated storyteller enamored with peanut cookery. He details the historical culinary uses of the peanut, from peanut soup to peanut bread to peanut-fed pork. We also discover the origin of Cracker Jacks and candy bars such as Baby Ruth, Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup, and M&Ms.

The remaining chapters focus on the commercialization, industrialization, and globalization of the peanut. It is in these pages that Smith discusses the highs and lows of the peanut industry based in part on politics, war, health issues, and culinary trends. He also comments on the recent history of the peanut, touching upon cookery, the media, and the use of peanuts in songs, slogans, books, television, radio, and film. The book concludes with a discussion of the production and exportation of peanuts, which compares current peanut production, exportation, and consumption with that of the 1700s and 1800s.

Smith brings the book together with 125 historical peanut recipes. From beverages to breads to soups, readers are able to see how peanut recipes have changed and developed over the past two centuries. Included are recipes for foods such as Cream of Peanut Soup, published in 1902 in Mrs. Rorer’s New Cook Book (p.176), and the Beech-Nut Peanut Butter-Pimento-Cheese Sandwich, published in 1914 in Beech-Nut Peanut Butter: The Great Tea and Luncheon Delicacy as Served in New York Tea-Rooms (p.146). These recipes provide insight into the culinary use of peanuts over the past century and enable us to see the evolution of the peanut and its status in American culture.

Overall, this book is of value to anyone interested in the peanut and its culinary upbringing in America. From cookery to politics to the media, Peanuts: The Illustrious History of the Goober Pea provides tidbits of information for everyone.

—Abbie Gellman, New York, NY

Bookends

All About Ices, Jellies, And Creams
Henry G. Harris and S.P. Borella
London: Kegan Paul, 2002
101 pp. Illustrations. $110.00 (cloth)

Learning trade secrets is fun, especially when they’ve been kept for one hundred years. All About Ices is a reissue of a trade publication, not dated but estimated to have been published shortly after the turn of the twentieth century. It was written by two professional confectioners, Henry Harris and S.P. Borella, who had, according to their own account, “actual work and experience of nearly forty years in many lands.”

In their foreword, they say that the book is meant to improve the quality of confectioners’ products. They hope their message reaches younger members of the trade since “older ones, deeply set in their wicked ways, are largely past praying for.”

All About Ices offers the food historian valuable information about the practices, equipment, techniques, and ingredients of the time as well as hundreds of recipes. It includes black-and-white illustrations and detailed descriptions of ice cream freezers, instructions for making iced soufflés, diagrams of bombes, and a lesson in the “ancient custom of making fine preserves for trade use.” There is a detailed index.

The recipes include water and cream ices, iced soufflés, bombes, iced puddings, jellied desserts, molded creams, jams, conserves, wine cups, and other beverages. Just as delicious as the recipes are the authors’ often sardonic comments. They call the term “ice-cream” inaccurate, preferring the older “cream ice.” Poor-quality claret is “red ink.” A hotel menu is “nomenclature gone mad with a vengeance.”

Brown bread iced pudding (actually very popular at the time) is “only favoured by faddists and food cranks.”

Harris and Borella offer their thoughts on the quality of vanilla, the sad neglect of damson plums, and the profit that may be obtained by making and selling marrons glacés. Throughout the book they comment on pricing, often offering both top-quality and lesser-quality recipes so confectioners can meet their markets’ demands successfully. For example, they have five recipes for Vanilla Cream Ice, two of which use arrowroot to replace some of the cream.

The men write in one distinctive voice, differing just once, on the subject of pomegranate water ice. It seems one, not named, likes it very much, while the other “thinks and says unprintable things about it.”

One caveat: The text contains a lot of dropped or broken type, apparently reproduced from the original.
All About Ices was originally published as one in a series of books. The others were All About Gateaux and Dessert Cakes, All About Biscuits, All About Genoese Glacés, Petits Fours & Bonbons, and All About Pastries. Publisher Kegan Paul plans to reissue some of the others in the future.

—Jeri Quinzio, Author of the forthcoming Cold Comfort: A Cook’s History of Ice Cream

The Wines of Argentina, Chile and Latin America
Christopher Fielden
x + 274 pp. Illustrations. $16.95 (paper)

The British really began the art of wine writing, and, I suppose, the art of travel writing as well. Wine merchants with a penchant for the pen felt compelled to muse about their French clarets and their Portuguese Ports, their Spanish amontillados and Italian Barolos, and a specialty writing profession was born. To my mind, although there are some excellent American wine journalists, Decanter, Britain’s leading wine magazine, is what keeps this venerable tradition going.

It comes as no surprise, then, that author Christopher Fielden has plied the wine trade for some forty-five years in Britain, and had a column in Decanter for ten. Although I am unfamiliar with his other nine books, this one will surely earn him wine-writing accolades, for this is a concisely written, authoritative work about an underrepresented area. His writing style, slightly stiff for the American reader, nevertheless carries with it an engrossing passion that keeps the pages turning.

A quick perusal of wine volumes in the bookstore reveals that Latin and South America are truly underrepresented. Fielden mentions in the introduction that the last book in English about the wines of Chile was published some twenty years ago (p.1), which is incorrect, as The Wine of Chile by Hubrecht Duijker and Hugh Johnson was published in 2000. Nevertheless, for a region that is capturing so much market attention, it is largely invisible in print.

Of course, of all of Latin America, Chile is the country that most American wine drinkers recognize and want to know more about. In 1998, according to the Department of Commerce, America imported over five million cases of Chilean wine, making it the third largest exporter to this market. It has had the best import penetration for this area, and the most foreign investment. The French (Marnier-Lapostolle & Mouton-Rothschild) and the Americans (Robert Mondavi and Kendall-Jackson) have poured millions of dollars into various valleys, and, as these investors have the infrastructure to drive exports and distribution, the consumer has benefited. Fielden does an admirable job in elucidating the idea of Chilean “First Growths,” a term taken from the top five estates in France. For the collectors’ market, these wines are ones to be taken seriously, and they are priced seriously as well.

Argentina, the next up-and-coming country from Latin America, is also thoroughly discussed by Fielden, who has a penchant for quoting from historical documents, as well as naming obscure grape varietals. We find out, for example, that the father of the Argentine wine industry was a Jesuit priest named Juan Cidron. In 1553, “this was the man who was sent and he is recorded as having arrived with a crucifix in one hand and a bundle of vine-shoots and cottonseed in the other (p.10).” And although this book was written before the Argentine market crash, Fielden correctly predicted the “clouds on the horizon” (p.9), speculating “as to whether the economy is about to implode with dangerous results” (p.9).

But possibly the most interesting chapters in the book are the other eight, each of which profiles a country that almost never appears above the radar in wine writing. Take Cuba, for example. (Really.) Fielden quotes no less an authority than fellow Brit Jancis Robinson in her Oxford Companion to Wine as giving one sentence to the island’s viticulture. “The ubiquitous Chardonnay is now grown on this Caribbean island in the tobacco-growing region of Pinar del Rio” (p.182). Fielden, on the other hand, tells us about the one winery in Cuba, Vinos Fantinel, birthed by the Cuban consul in Rome and a well-known Italian vintner. He predicts that although not a good wine (this is, after all, a tropical country), it will make a terrific tourist souvenir. Then, there’s always the story about Venezuela’s wine industry…

—Jim Burns, Food journalist and wine publication editor

Discovering Washington Wines: An Introduction to One of the Most Exciting Premium Wine Regions
Tom Parker
Seattle: Raconteurs Press, 2002
162 pp. Illustrations. $16.95 (paper)

There are some startling facts about the state of Washington and the state of its wine industry:
Fact: the industry is worth $2.4 billion.
Fact: Its northerly latitude, about that of Bordeaux’s, averages two hours more daily sunlight than falls on California’s prime growing area.
Fact: In ten years, production of Washington wines has doubled, making wine grapes the fourth largest crop in the state.

Who knew? Most of us assume that Seattle is the capital of coffee because the locals need something to keep their spirits up in the face of unrelenting rain, and if you want a great apple, come visit. But as author Tom Parker skillfully shows, there are now two hundred wineries in a state that boasts five federally recognized American Viticultural Areas (AVA), similar to the more familiar French Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée. To qualify legally, each region must be defined by a unique climate, soil, and physical features that distinguish it from the surrounding areas. The dates of these AVAs, from the first in 1983 (Yakima Valley) to the newest in 2001 (Red Mountain), show that in just twenty years an infrastructure has been created for premium wines. The timeframe is similar to California’s Napa Valley, which in a space of little more than thirty years now makes certain “cult” wines that cost as much as a First Growth Bordeaux.

Although the great financial bubble burst of the early years of this century is bringing wine prices closer to earth, the better Washington wines (read Syrah) fetch in the neighborhood of $40.00 to $90.00. The popular wine press is even touting certain Washington Syrahs as the best in the nation.

Parker devotes ninety-six pages of this slim volume to a whirlwind tour of appropriate geography, the industry’s roots, grape varietals, and even the elements of wine making. This is an impressive feat in that he never gets bogged down with the kind of information that drives casual wine readers crazy: clone types, soil types, weather belts, etc.

It’s easy to imagine pulling this book out of a rental car glove box for an informed fit of exploration. Given that sixty-five pages comprise an appendix that lists the name, address, and phone number of every winery in the state, that might just be the perfect use for this volume.

—Jim Burns, Food journalist and wine publication editor