The authors and translator get off to a rough start in their “Note Concerning a Definition of Pasta Products”:

“Pasta products” are understood to be the end product of a series of technical operations (on a domestic, artisanal, or industrial scale) applied to a mixture of soft wheat flour or durum wheat semolina with water or other substances, more or less liquid, making it possible to obtain a kneaded dough that is subsequently cut into small regular shapes, which are then cooked in a moist environment. This series of technical operations includes a mixing of ingredients, kneading the resulting dough, cutting it into pieces, shaping them, possibly drying them, and possibly storing them. The pasta shapes are then boiled, poached, or steamed. (p.xvii)

Reading this in Italian or in translation, it is apparent that it is an acceptable definition for Italian pasta. Yet the authors make it clear that a whole category of grains that were combined with liquids and then cut existed long ago in China under the general name of bing. The English-language reader takes pasta to mean the Italian product (particularly because this book comes from Italy) and would hope to find different words for products from elsewhere. These do appear, but then fall under that catch-all phrase, pasta, which does not correctly describe the numerous grain-and-water doughs that are transformed into noodles in Asia, Africa, and northern Europe. It was also a poor choice to often translate pasta as “paste” rather than “dough,” as in lavori di pasta (“creations in paste”), or to allow Libro delle paste to become Book of pastes rather than Book of pastas (p.38). The Garzanti Italian-English dictionary translates “pasta” as “1. dough, 2. pasta, 3. paste, 4. pastry,” with the third definition having basically lost its alimentary connotation.

The authors, too, are often unhelpful in terms of clarity and consistency. After saying that there was pasta in China long before Europe, we are told that “Europeans invented pasta late, even though conditions favored them” (p.4). One cannot invent something that already exists.

The narrative becomes more assured when recent history is explored, obviously because there was more documentation available, so that less conjecture was required. Their descriptions of the gradual mechanization of pasta production in Italy and elsewhere are exciting. Interesting too are the chapters examining how local tastes have influenced the way pasta is sauced and served. Perhaps most intriguing is the authors’ lengthy study of “pasta products” in China, a nation that justifiably claims to be pasta’s other homeland.

Ultimately, Pasta: The Story of a Universal Food should not be considered definitive. It does, however, offer much to enjoy as well as question, providing stimuli for more thought and study of a food that is so universal that it eludes easy description.

—Fred Plotkin, New York, NY

Feast and Folly: Cuisine, Intoxication, and the Poetics of the Sublime
Allen S. Weiss
New York: SUNY Press, 2002
157 pp. $44.50 (cloth)

Allen Weiss, a professor of Performance and Cinema Studies at New York University, has written a difficult, sometimes indigestible book, which may nevertheless be the most serious, most compelling, and at the same time the most amusing inquiry into the aesthetics of gastronomy that has been written in recent times. The difficulty arises out of the seriousness with which Weiss seeks to lend to gastronomy a certain philosophical distinction, the distinctness of a fully warranted, independent aesthetic domain, with its inherent history, its codes, and its pure judgments of taste, to speak like Kant, which Weiss often does. Weiss writes: “The present study is neither a history or a sociology of Modern French cuisine, but rather an explanation of the conceptual preconditions, the discursive limits, and the poetic and rhetorical forms of the culinary imagination” (p.13). Weiss wants to do for the culinary imagination what Kant does, in the Critique of Judgment, for the more broadly aesthetic one. His aim in defining the preconditions and determining the limits of what a certain modernist art might call culinary invention (p.90) is not merely typological, but seeks to raise the theorization of cuisine to the status of a full-blown theory of art, one in which Gasteria not only takes her tenth place among the Muses but also transforms their domains. Such bold ambition in a book on cooking is rare indeed. It entails, to quote a piece of Weiss’s gritty jargon, “transforming the aestheticizing of the senses and eliminating the previously held limits between the arts.”

In remarkable, dense chapters devoted to the philosophy of drunkenness, to the unfigurability of squid, and to the ideology of pot au feu—or to the conceptual implications of the difference between dill and fennel—Weiss seeks to discover the metaphysical premises implicit in French cuisine. Every cuisine, he argues, has its own philosophy; the French have mobilized their theory of cuisine to produce the most “extreme psychological and metaphysical condition of the aesthetic domain, the sublime, in relation to gastronomy” (p.13). By combining heterogeneous sensations and creating
complex aesthetic forms, the theorists and practitioners of French cooking invented an autonomous fine art, not merely a craft, which embodies the most revolutionary premises of modern and, Weiss would say, postmodern art.

In a remarkable section, Weiss demonstrates how the romantic promotion of subjective experience linked to Baudelaire’s notions of synesthetic correspondences worked to overcome the classical, Kantian distinctions among the arts and their accompanying hierarchies. By incorporating versions of Baudelairean intoxication, Dionysian frenz of a Nietzsche, Rimbaldo perversion of the senses, nineteenth-century cooking expanded the limits of taste, giving rise to intermingling sensations that evoke the “ecstatic temporality,” the infinity traditionally associated with the sublime. Nineteenth-century aesthetic theory therefore finds its most radical embodiment in cuisine, when cooks sought progressively not only to establish new relations and ratios between the senses, but to overcome the boundaries between the arts by creating recipes that brought together the most surprising and diverse elements, in the most unexpected combinations—in forms that were elaborately sculpted, choreographed, or composed.

While not a history of cooking, Feast and Folly nevertheless tells a story of metaphysical progress, as French cuisine elevates itself dialectically from its beginnings in the early nineteenth century (when the word “gastronomy” was invented along with the restaurant), leading to its formalization in Escoffier at the beginning of the twentieth, down to the revolution of nouvelle cuisine and its most recent turn to fusion. But that diachronic history actually represents synchronic moments in a theory of French cooking culminating in recent tendencies that share “several central tenets of the discourses of modernism and postmodernism in the arts.” With characteristic boldness and precision, Weiss enumerates four of them: “self-conscious reflexivity (experimentation to reveal the primary qualities of the component materials of a work); questioning of origins (the realization that all inventions are but variations, transmutations, or inspirations based on previous works); regionalism (the decentralization and relativization of techniques, materials, and styles); and exoticism and fusion (the juxtaposition and incorporation of foreign elements on equal footing with native material)” (p.91).

A marvelous postface to this slim book offers “An Introduction to Modern French Cuisine through Several Exemplary Menus.” It begins with the “funeral supper” of Grimod de la Reynière (1783), all in black (caviar, pumpernickel, black Turkish olives, boudin noir, coulis of truffles, and dark chocolate pudding), and culminates in the cutting-edge menu of Pierre Gagnaire (i.e., sweetbreads with coffee beans), and concludes with a spare, elegant masterpiece of fusion cooking by Jean-Georges Vongerichten (quail rubbed with Thai spices, crunchy cress salad, spiced codfish with curried artichokes, mango rice pudding, exotic fruit sorbet). Weiss explicates the menus as if they were brilliant little poems.

Not an easy book, Feast and Folly nevertheless rewards the reader’s pains by expanding his understanding of cuisine and extending it into realms of critical and theoretical discourse from which it is usually very far removed.

—Richard Klein, Cornell University

Around the Table of the Romans: Food and Feasting in Ancient Rome
Patrick Faas
356 pp. Illustrations. $29.95 (cloth)

All food historians who research food in ancient Rome are grateful to Apicus, whose cookery book is probably the first known to us. More information on ancient Roman food is obtained from the writings of other authors, such as Cato, Columella, and Pliny, who also provide details of the growing of crops, preparation of food, table manners, and dining habits, so that a modern author has, in some sense, to be both translator and compiler. In doing so, an author should acknowledge the work of other translators, either by referencing or providing a more useful bibliography. In Faas’s book, Barbara Flower and Elisabeth Rosenbaum’s pioneer translation of Apicus, The Roman Cookery Book is acknowledged, but there is no mention of John Edward’s The Roman Cookery of Apicus, or of the work of Andrew Dalby and Sally Grainger, in particular, The Classical Cookbook.

Faas divides his book into two major parts. The first considers the history of cooking, meals, table manners and etiquette, the menu, wines and other drinks, and the cook and his condiments. The second deals with grains, pulses, vegetables, fruit, meat, and fish. This section is somewhat arbitrarily labeled “From the Land, From the Air, From the Water, From the Fire,” corresponding to the four elements into which the Romans divided the world.

Faas claims that his book is no historical treatise but a combination of ancient religion, table manners, social history, and medical theories. The historical content is a breathless gallop through Roman history, but the vast resources of the Empire are given scant attention. This is particularly serious where olive oil and wine are concerned. These were