In this study, Wendy A. Woloson argues that as sugar itself became more refined during the nineteenth century, so did attitudes towards it. The background is one of increased availability, as North America became less reliant on European-owned sugar islands in the Caribbean, and sugar refining developed into an industrial process. Woloson’s first thirty pages outline the early modern history of sugar; this introductory material is hard going in places, and it is sometimes difficult to follow the threads. Persevere, or go back after reading the rest. The main part of the book, a fascinating dissection of themes relating to the democratization of sugar and confectionery in American culture from about 1790 to 1910, is more rewarding. Alone, sugar makes penny candies, attractive to children; with the help of ice, it is the foundation for ice cream and iced sodas, refreshing during summer heat; together with chocolate, it becomes fine bonbons, promoted as courting gifts. Other chapters examine ornamental icing and sugar work as an expression of status, particularly at weddings, and confectionery making in a domestic context. Recipes and manuals of housekeeping and deportment, plus ideas from social theorists, are supplemented with illustrations from contemporary sources such as advertisements and trade cards.

This forms a backdrop for a second, and for the writer, more intriguing theme, that of feminization: “As a rarity, sugar signified male economic prowess in America. As it became cheaper and more prolific, however, it became linked with femininity: its economic devaluation coincided with its cultural demotion” (p.3). The gender argument is not always clear, and the idea of sugar starting out as “masculine” seems to be an assumption. Ideas relating to sugar alone, as an ingredient of confectionery, and the abstract notion of sweetness in language are used to back up the discussion, but there are problems, including the intrusion of technology (defined as male) into the female domestic sphere. That confectionery was heavily promoted to children and women is well demonstrated, but how do we know that men did not also eat confections? Surely they shared in desserts and canned fruits? A glance at alcohol might have what about chewing gum, developed in the 1890s?

Some sugar work does show links with femininity—for instance the white wedding cake, discussed at length—but the idea is a complex one, and I am not totally convinced by the evidence presented; perhaps because the case for sugar being masculine in earlier centuries is, as the author admits, not all that clear. Assumptions to do with time, place, and income group also lead to disconcerting shifts. It seems that middle-class life in the eastern states during the late nineteenth century is what is really under the microscope. Discussion is marred occasionally by shaky detail: for instance, sugar was exported to Europe in semi-refined form, not cane (as implied on pp. 21, 26) or juice (p.27). This is a shame, because it is obvious that the author has researched the subject deeply. Part of Woloson’s argument hinges on the conflation of sweetness with feminine qualities, and she comments on how much more could be done on this lexicographical line of research. And observations about perceptions of candy consumption and female gluttony still resonate loudly.

What emerges is a view of sweetness and confectionery at one particular time in one particular culture. It shows how the accumulation of ideas about sugar, which developed over centuries in Europe, were telescoped into the space of a few decades across the Atlantic. We now know that sugar is “a nonessential good with little nutritional value” (p.12), but nineteenth-century North Americans would, surely, be influenced by the aspirations it held for their European ancestors. Abundant sugar was imposed on a post-colonial, newly industrialized society. Did that society develop new ideas, pick up on ones current in the Western world generally, or was it that the ancient and deep fascination that sugar held for their European ancestors welled up in this new context, in a short time span? All three, perhaps. The terrifying consumption figures for sugar and artificial sweeteners cited in the postscript show both that the North American desire for sweetness continues, and that whatever the flaws and unanswered questions, Woloson has a subject worthy of consideration.

—Laura Mason, author, Sugar-Plums and Sherbet

Matters of Taste: Food & Drink in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and Life
Donna R. Barnes and Peter G. Rose
Essays by Charles T. Gehring and Nancy T. Minty
Albany and Syracuse, NY: Albany Institute of History & Art and Syracuse University Press, 2002
162 pp. Color plates. Recipe booklet. $49.95 (paper)

What are we looking for in Dutch art? The dewdrop on a freshly gathered cherry? The imagined crunch of a freshly-