Players can chose between two game modes: a free-form “sandbox” mode, where the player focuses only on remaining solvent, and a storyline-based “campaign” mode, where the player takes the role of Armand, a young chef who aims to keep evil food conglomerate OmniFood at bay by developing a competing chain of restaurants. Understandably, business simulation games require player goals to be objective and quantifiable, but people who find restaurant conglomerates distasteful may find that the game’s goals conflict with their own ideas of a model food business.

The campaign mode provides a tutorial to guide new players through the game’s interface as part of the storyline. The tutorial omits many of the options required to play the game well, however, making the learning curve a bit steep for novice players. Expect to invest several hours in the game before feeling comfortable with the feature-laden user interface.

Early scenarios involve developing Armand’s experience in running his retired uncle’s modest Paris restaurant. Later scenarios introduce Armand to new recipes and secret ingredients, specialty food suppliers, opportunities to open additional restaurants in Rome and Los Angeles, and even a love interest. In order to increase customer satisfaction, players can also assign specific recipes to chefs who have the greatest skill in preparing them. The storyline further includes Iron Chef-style cooking competitions that give Armand and other chefs opportunities to reach “star chef” status, which increases a restaurant’s popularity. The goals at each stage in the game build upon previous goals, taking Armand closer to success in his own multi-restaurant empire.

Obviously, a restaurant simulation should focus heavily on food. Restaurant Empire provides 180 recipes spread among French, Italian, and American cuisines, but the game also presents a reality check as it forces players to evaluate food cost and quality, time and equipment required for preparation, price markup, the complexity of the recipe, and the skill of the chef at making that recipe. The food descriptions used in the game often seem incongruous with the restaurant context; for example, the menu for Armand’s first French restaurant calls cassoulet “Dried Bean Casserole” and Tarte Tatin “French Apple Tart,” as if to remind players that the game is a business simulation first and a food fantasy second. Additionally, the blocky, rough-edged graphics tend to make the food unattractive, even at close range.

But food is not the only thing that makes a restaurant. The restaurant environment, including kitchen equipment, dining-room layout, noise level, and decor, can be configured and modified by the player based on customer feedback. A layout that, for example, crams too many tables in a given space may elicit customer complaints and therefore require adjustment. At first, the menu and furnishings can be kept simple to match Armand’s limited skills in the restaurant business, but as Armand gains experience, players can select restaurant locations, upgrade furnishings, and install better kitchen equipment to cater to a more upscale clientele. Players also must hire and fire staff, set their salaries, provide training, and oversee their morale to keep the restaurant running smoothly.

As customers enter and leave the restaurant, players can monitor a customer list that tracks each customer’s satisfaction, time in the restaurant, money spent, and complaints, as well as miscellaneous notes, such as the customer’s favorite food. Success at each stage ultimately hinges on the quick resolution of customer complaints. Wait too long, and the number of customers will dwindle, sinking restaurant revenue. At times, I was watching the list with the obsession of a day trader watching stock prices, ready to offer customers their favorite foods as soon as they sat down and to pounce on each complaint as soon as it registered. Restaurant operations can be evaluated through regularly updated reports that include restaurant ratings, sales reports, income statements, financial graphs, and a customer complaint list. Notably, the game provides financial information in a slick package that is surprisingly approachable given the sheer volume of data to analyze.

Playing Restaurant Empire reminds players that business success depends as much on factors beyond their control as on careful planning. For those who want to immerse themselves in the micro-management and number-crunching aspects of running a restaurant, Restaurant Empire fits the bill. But for those whose restaurant dreams require culinary creativity, playing Restaurant Empire will likely leave them cold.

—Anna M. Shih, Bloomfield Township, MI

Bookends

Early French Cookery: Sources, History, Original Recipes and Modern Adaptations
D. Eleanor and Terence Scully
Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002
392 pp. Illustrations. $24.95 (paper)

Anyone who looks at a medieval manuscript illumination depicting a banquet must feel a degree of curiosity about
the food on those tables. What would it have been like to cook with those unfamiliar herbs and spices? What is it like to eat off a bread trencher, to do without forks? It is not surprising that many a teacher has wanted to inspire an enthusiasm for the Middle Ages by leading his or her class through the reenactment of a medieval meal.

The Scullys have come to the rescue. Terence Scully has written extensively and enthusiastically about medieval cookery. His editions of manuscripts including the Viandier, the Viandier, and that of Master Chiquart, chef cook to Amadeus, Duke of Savoy, and the subsequent translation of it into English, have been welcome additions to the published record of medieval culinary practice. In this present volume he is joined by D. Eleanor Scully in offering their readers a guide to the maze of French medieval cookery. They have given us a brief historical introduction, planning advice, and a substantial selection of recipes, mostly from the Viandier, the Ménagier de Paris, and Chiquart’s Du fait de cuisine. The recipes are presented in the original fourteenth- and fifteenth-century French, with an extensive commentary and the Scullys’ modern interpretations of the recipes for use in the contemporary kitchen. There are simple recipes for stuffed chicken and complicated ones for elaborate freestanding pies. Quotations from medical authorities about various ingredients diversify the text. There is also a description of a day in the life of a French cook in a ducal household in 1416.

These are rather relaxed interpretations. The recipes are designed to be executed in modern kitchens; the boar’s head is confected from papier maché. The reader will not need to learn the art of hearth cooking, and will rarely need to search for obscure ingredients. This is a book that welcomes the curious, and, as such, should bring much pleasure and to search for obscure ingredients. This is a book that welcomes the need to learn the art of hearth cooking, and will rarely need

Feast Your Eyes: The Unexpected Beauty of Vegetable Gardens
Susan J. Pennington
In Association with Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, Washington, D.C.
133 pp. 100 color illustrations. $29.95 (paper)

This beautiful history of ornamental vegetable gardens is worth seeing for the illustrations alone. Drawn primarily from the Smithsonian Institution’s Archive of American Gardens, the illustrations and accompanying text depict 350 years of ornamental vegetable gardens. Beginning with Louis xiv’s extravagant gardens at Versailles, the panorama veers east to the delicate color and ink gardens of the Ming Dynasty. It works its way back to England where the eighteenth century banished vegetables to the edges of the property lest they “blemish the prospect” of the romantic landscape garden, and then moves to America, where the Aztecs nourished their infinitely varied crops, Thomas Jefferson lavished attention on the vegetables at Monticello, and the two world wars sprouted victory gardens.

The text offers a serious but abbreviated history of ornamental vegetable gardens—all the rage in the seventeenth century, banished to the periphery in the eighteenth, gradually if sporadically recuperated during the nineteenth and twentieth until bursting into the glorious fecundity of the last thirty years. The writing is concise, informative, and readable, but it rarely offers the analytic depth, lyric beauty, or narrative intrigue of, say, Michael Pollan’s Botany of Desire. Chapter 7, “The Glorious Vegetable Garden,” is little more than an extended caption for the twenty photographs of vegetables and flowers mingling with contemporary garden sculpture, bee skeps, rustic trellises, metalwork, and brickwork. The last chapter, perhaps the most entertaining of all, offers a little history and lots of lore about vegetables that are not really vegetables: ornamental peppers that are not to be eaten, sweet potatoes that produce vines but no taters, flowering cabbages that are not cabbages and do not flower.

Susan Pennington is a scholar of horticultural history; she is interested in visual beauty, cultural developments, and historical change, but she is (admittedly) not a gardener. As a result, the book is less helpful than it might be for anyone interested in designing and harvesting an ornamental vegetable garden. The captions make no attempt to identify individual plants, and surprisingly little attention is paid to how combinations of plants create the mosaics of color, texture, and form that make the ornamental kitchen