Some of the most pressing issues for the French today pertain to agriculture and food production, whether subsidies to farmers, unreasonable legislation, or the concern over risks associated with genetically modified crops. These relevant ideas, which so preoccupy growers and consumers alike, are only marginally addressed in the book.

For the seasoned traveler to France, Sanders’s observations about truffle hunting, the force-feeding of ducks, the rigors of a chef’s life, and the social significance of the café will not be particularly illuminating; they are too predictable. However, for the armchair traveler who has never experienced the intoxicating magic that is France, From Here You Can’t See Paris might just be a suitable starting point.

—Alexandra Leaf, New York, NY

Land of Plenty: A Treasury of Authentic Sichuan Cooking
Fuchsia Dunlop
416 pp. Photographs. $30.00 (cloth)

Amid an ocean of cookbooks that aspire to introduce new and, dare I say, exotic cuisines to readers (here, I really mean exoticized rather than truly exotic cuisines), Fuchsia Dunlop’s Land of Plenty stands out like a beacon of authenticity. Too many cookbooks attempt to make readers feel that the style of cooking and eating they’re learning about is at once foreign yet familiar by adapting traditional recipes to suit their taste buds and comfort zones, often replicating erroneous stereotypes along the way. Dunlop does make that mistake. “Sichuanese cooking is one of the greatest unknown cuisines of the world,” she writes. “It is legendary in China for its sophistication and amazing diversity, but unknown to the Western world, for its sheer exuberance and good sense” (p.16). Most Western cookbook authors have spent only a fleeting month or two in China begging recipes from chefs, then imagining themselves experts on the food of this vast nation. There are also immigrant Chinese restaurateurs and television chefs who market their versions of Chinese food designed to appeal to local diners. Chop suey, anyone? As Dunlop points out, “In the West, strangely, Chinese cuisine is almost always treated as a great tradition, with a few regional variations. . . . Outiders often forget that China is more of a continent than a country. . . . Sichuan is as large as France, with a population nearly twice the size of Britain. It has its own dialect, its own operatic style, a unique teahouse culture and, of course, and an outstanding culinary tradition” (p.16).

Dunlop had the luxury of living in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan, for over two years. She even studied at the Sichuan Institute of Higher Cuisine, going local, in the best possible way. “With this foundation,” she writes, “and a knowledge of a small repertoire of classic Sichuan dishes, I was able to talk to chefs and restaurateurs, and to spend fascinating days of study in several local restaurants” (p.13). The result is a multifaceted cookbook that positions the food traditions of Sichuan within the context of its geography, history, and culture.

Nine chapters cover everything from street food and dumplings to meat, poultry, fish, sweet dishes, and hotpots; each opens with an introduction that explains its place in Sichuanese cuisine. Meat, for example, usually means pork to the Sichuanese (p.166), and to emphasize this, Dunlop includes a poem about eating pork by Sung Dynasty poet Su Dongpo. In addition to an English name translated from its Chinese original, each recipe is accompanied by its Chinese name written in Chinese script and in pinyin (the standard transliteration system for Chinese characters), making it possible for readers to familiarize themselves with the original name of the dish, which often reveals its cultural, social, or historical significance. An anecdote—about how the dish is eaten, why the Sichuanese adore its flavors, or whether it is a commoner’s dish—accompanies every recipe, bringing color and excitement to the experience of learning about Sichuanese cuisine. For example, Dunlop explains that a dish of bean-thread noodles with minced meat is called “Ants Climbing a Tree” because “if you dangle a few strands of these noodles from your chopsticks, tiny morsels will cling to them ‘like ants climbing a tree’” (p.225). While attempting to keep as close to the original recipe as possible, Dunlop recognizes that most readers will have limited access to certain herbs and spices and offers alternatives to harder-to-find ingredients. At the same time, she explains how to replicate the effect of the original ingredient, or slightly change the nature of the final dish. Yet the reader always knows how it is traditionally prepared.

Even for the noncook, Dunlop’s well-researched tome serves as a riveting and accessible introduction to the history, language, and culture of Sichuan. It is rare that a cookbook so clearly recognizes that to understand a cuisine one must necessarily learn about the context within which it exists, that both what and how people eat are closely interwoven with the way they live, who they are, and where they have come from historically and culturally. The development of Sichuan’s cuisine is admirably outlined in Land of Plenty, as are the nuanced differences among street food, simple home cooking, and banquets. Dunlop even explains,
with great gusto, the complexities of the twenty-three flavors that form the basis of the Sichuanese culinary canon and the fifty-six cooking methods it employs.

In many ways, it takes a passionate individual like Dunlop, an outsider for whom the way things are done in Sichuan has not been internalized or naturalized, to articulate with such clarity the intricacies of a cuisine in a way that others may learn from. Her book, with its detailed historical references, systematic recipes, and palpable enthusiasm for Sichuan, is well worth turning to for both cooking and reference.

—Su-Lyn Tan, author, World Food: Malaysia & Singapore

Asian Food: The Global and the Local
Edited by Katarzyna Cwiertka with Boudewijn Walraven
Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2001
x + 190 pp. $55.00 (cloth)

This collection of essays had its origins in a workshop held in Leiden in 1998. Published as part of the ConsumAsiaN Book series, the collection investigates interconnections between globalization and food during the twentieth century: this it does by tracing changes in Asian foodways both inside and outside of Asia. That the book’s temporal stretch is not strictly confined to the closing decades of the twentieth century as the exclusive site of momentous change, as is usually the case in studies on globalization, gives the authors more latitude to view and present transformations in Asian foodways as the unfolding of a multifaceted process with a relatively long historical pedigree. The region’s colonial background, too, demands analyses that highlight the subtle blending of foodways by bringing into historical view the symbiotic nature of this culinary exchange. Essays by Cheng on the multiplicity of historical determinants that, not paradoxically, came to shape Hong Kong’s not only cosmopolitan but, more importantly, “native” cuisines and by Adel P. Den Hartog on the marketing of milk products in non-dairying Indonesia and the problems this gave birth to in infant feeding depict only one aspect of this process. Anneke H. Van Otterloo’s essay on the spread of Chinese and Indonesian restaurants in the Netherlands traces inter-cultural exchange from a different vantage point. Helen Bush and Rory Williams’s essay, likewise, tracks markers of hospitality by Punjabi migrants in a new geographic setting, Scotland, and underlines the fact that easy availability of meat in this new setting has accentuated its usage in special meals, meanwhile enhancing the role hospitality plays as a social institution in the migrants’ new environment. This theme is fully echoed in Katarzyna Cwiertka’s essay on the growing adherence by Japanese expatriates to their native diet in the Netherlands, more so than they would in their native land.

The remaining four essays investigate the contradictory results of the intersecting of culinary cultures and diets. Overall, they do not subscribe to triumphalist readings of globalization, but replace unilinear accounts of the process with a nuanced and reflexive evaluation that embeds globalization in its proper social settings. Pat Caplan and Merry I. White document how, in India and Japan, the process of acculturation of new culinary repertoires and techniques is not a unilinear, much less an uncontested, process of simple adoption, but is embedded in and filtered through existing social structures. Caplan emphasizes, among other things, that the availability in Madras of cheap supply of servants to cook for middle-class households shapes in part the dynamic that determines the pace and extent of dissemination of new food items and new dishes. Where the new food order is filtered through women as homemakers, as in the case of Japan as examined by White, it creates subversive strains both on symbolic and material levels by relieving women of some of their so-called traditional duties at the risk of being blamed for “poor mothering.” Essays by Robert W. Pemberton and Boudewijn C.A. Walraven, on the other hand, place emphasis on countercurrents to globalization. Both authors deal with Korea: Pemberton documents how consumption of wild-gathered foods has been a mainstay of the Korean diet, while Walraven dwells on kimch’i pickles, rice, and dog meat, and emphasizes that despite the fact that their consumption has steadily been on the decrease, they have nonetheless come to stand for “national” identity.

Surely, looking at Asia from Leiden provides a view different than that from New York. This view also has its constraints, in that China, which escaped Dutch control, remains outside of the book’s analytic compass. If Asia provides an excellent vantage point from which to trace the blending and acculturation of variegated foodways, this is due in large part to the centrality, from early on, of China and to a lesser degree, the Indian Ocean in regional and world economic commodity flows. Yet, historically, the usual suspects of “globalization” have merely nested on the very margins of this continental landmass. Hence, if the analyses in this collection that depict the blending of foodways between Asia and Europe were complemented by that of culinary exchanges within Asia, a different light would have been shed on the subject, enriching the thematic texture of the volume. Without China and its overbearing or