events that would “change her life forever.” There is some repetition of events and also some minor inconsistencies in the storytelling. Rossant’s compelling life story and, indeed, her culinary knowledge are deserving of a bolder editor.

Rossant writes at length about the Egyptian food of her childhood. She also writes passionately about the joy of her introduction to French food, but those with an interest in Jewish food will be disappointed. The prodigious quantities of ham, which is consumed throughout the book, as is shellfish, go uncommented upon. While this practice accurately reflects the nature of secular Jewish life, in which the prohibitions of Leviticus are cheerfully disregarded, some explanation for a gentile audience seems warranted from Rossant who has, after all, written New Kosher Cooking. Nor does Rossant consider either the influence of Jewish foodways and the Sephardi palate or, if that is the case, their absence, on her culinary sensibility.

The book’s strength is that it does deliver a detailed account of one child’s introduction to fine dining. Certainly Rossant knows her beans and delivers a rich tale of a life well lived and fabulously fed. The recipes are superb, as is their user-friendly presentation.

Rossant’s introduction to American food is amusingly recounted—tasteless, sliced white bread and instant coffee understandably shocking her Parisian sensibility. The encounter between French Sephardi sensibility and the American rendition of Ashkenazi food is limited to her discovery of bagels and rye bread.

Rossant tells us of the happiness of her forty-seven years of marriage. She has traveled a culinary path we would all envy, and yet she appears not to realize how very fortunate this life of hers has been. Rossant’s recurring lack of self-reflexivity is the book’s weakness, even though the intensity of her engagement with food and the exquisite recipes she offers lift it above a mediocre coming-of-age narrative of the spoiled rich girl.

—Felicity Newman, Murdoch University

From Here, You Can’t See Paris: Seasons of a French Village and Its Restaurant
Michael S. Sanders
x + 322 pp. $24.95 (cloth)

Michael S. Sanders is a Francophile after my own heart. In his new book, From Here You Can’t See Paris: Seasons of a French Village and Its Restaurant, he finds poetry in unexpected places—the wrinkled faces of octogenarian vegetable farmers, perfectly sautéed lobes of foie gras, and crumbling stone buildings that dot the rural landscape. His enthusiasm for subtleties of the French language and culture are palpable in the pages of this account of life in Les Arques, a tiny hilltop community in Southwest France whose population totals a mere 159.

Just how Sanders, his wife, young daughter, and Labrador retriever end up spending a year in this remote part of the Lot département is never adequately explained, but one presumes that the writer left his home in midcoast Maine with book contract already in hand. Though filled with keen and sensitive observations of daily life in Les Arques, the book is never entirely satisfying on several counts.

To begin with, the very concept of the project seems formulaic: American writer uncovers a forgotten part of the French countryside and writes up his experiences and discoveries among the natives based on his year’s stay there. Because it’s France, a culinary theme is naturally present. There’s the village restaurant, La Récrétion, with a chef of some merit, so exploit the restaurant angle. Country French village, American writer, restaurant kitchen, (trendy) concept of seasonality and local farming, and voilà, book concept? Include travel tips, too, in order to capture the travel market. Even provide the author’s personal e-mail address to maintain the “intimate” feel of the work.

Though Sanders does a fine job of evoking the predictably high-pressure atmosphere of the restaurant kitchen on a hectic, understaffed evening; of describing the relationship between front-of-the-house and back-of-the-house staff; and of illuminating complex, decades-old “political” relationships among villagers, the result is simply page after page of description, but to no fulfilling end.

Some comparison can be made between Amanda Hesser’s first book, The Cook and the Gardener: A Year of Recipes and Writings from the French Countryside (Norton, 1999) and that of Sanders; both treat year-long experiences of American writers in remote French villages in search of culinary themes and human relationships. But while Hesser’s evocation of life at Anne Willan’s Chateau du Fëy in Burgundy succeeds, Sanders’s disappoints. Hesser’s book has a clear point of view, and she is an integral part of her chronicle. Sanders has deliberately (one assumes) removed himself from the account, but herein lies his mistake.

His absence from the narrative creates a blandness and a distance between his subject matter and, ultimately, his readers. This is unfortunate. Had he paid more careful attention to the book’s concept and point of view, readers might have been served up a more meaningful account of a rapidly vanishing way of life in contemporary rural France.
Some of the most pressing issues for the French today pertain to agriculture and food production, whether subsidies to farmers, unreasonable EU 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 Westerners only by a few famous dishes and its ‘hot-and-spicy’ reputation” (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 one great tradition, with a few regional variations… Outsiders 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, 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.106), 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,