The vocabulary here is subtle, gentle. Gagnaire’s favorite word is “peacefully.” Even the cooking, the little that is described, is slow, done at low temperature.

The photos and text represent Gagnaire’s ideas in a contrapuntal poetry. A Victoria pineapple, scored and roasted with vanilla beans and sugar, looks so moist with caramelization that you’re tempted to swipe a taste with your finger. Then you read Gagnaire’s description of the pineapple “parading nonchalantly, as if it just came out of its hammock” (p. 26). The whimsical image of a gently swaying pineapple, on vacation, creeps into one’s mind. Who needs the workaday intrusion of a recipe?

Besides, if you keep alert you can pick up trucs and ideas for your own cooking. You might make yourself a note to try chocolate with celery confit or with caramel and artichokes. You learn to intensify the bitterness of orange juice as an ingredient by including a few seeds in the juice extractor. But then you might wonder what to actually do with a combination of pumpkin, carrot juice, parmesan, and pumpkin seeds. “The ingredients and pictures do not give away a recipe, only a trail,” warns Gagnaire. You betcha.

Between the sweet and the savory chapters is a meaty sixteen-page “Discussion on the Cuisine of Pierre Gagnaire” by food writer Bénédicte Beaugé, plus thirteen sample menus. Beaugé describes Gagnaire’s as a breakaway cuisine, with “unbelievable associations of flavors and textures” (p. 109). “Who before him has dared to combine bass with sweetbreads and foie gras; or bluefish, langoustines and ketchup?” (p. 113). (A wag might answer with a sigh of relief that Gagnaire offers no recipes.) Enhancing those juxtapositions is a layering of ingredients that hides them and builds a sense of discovery—will the next bite be sweetbread or crayfish?

On the surface Reflections on Culinary Artistry is a weighty book. It has substantial size and heft, a price tag of $50.00, and a list of five coproducers on the cover. But in the reading it is light, airy, evanescent. Yet as you linger over the pages, the mind of the chef slowly reveals its shape. A mood takes hold, a feeling seeps through. The sparseness of the text forces the reader to fill in, to react, to absorb through the senses and emotions more than the mind. If you pay close attention and, as author demands, open your mind to free it of preconceived ideas, an understanding of this extraordinary chef emerges. He doesn’t beckon you to your kitchen, however; he drives you to your computer to book a trip to Paris.

—Phyllis Richman, Washington, D.C.

Camembert: A National Myth
Pierre Boisard; translated by Richard Miller
257 pp. $29.95 (cloth)

There is perhaps no greater crisis in the life of a raw-milk cheese than its encounter with pasteurization. Camembert is no exception. In Camembert: A National Myth the status gained and attributes lost over the historical course of this famous French soft cheese are regained and gently debunked by sociologist of work Pierre Boisard.

Boisard begins at the alleged beginning with Camembert’s origin myth. Camembert was “created” by Norman dairywoman Marie Harel, and in 1928 a statue was erected in her honor at the initiative of New York physician Dr. Joseph Knirim, who lauded the cheese’s medicinal powers. However, the “actual” date of the cheese’s creation coincides with that of the French Republic itself, in the early 1790s; Boisard cites evidence from 1792 that includes a discussion of Camembert. The beginning is no beginning at all. Camembert was and was not created with the French Republic. It was and was not born in the villages of Camembert and Vinoutiers in the agricultural province of Auge. A further facet of this remarkable tale was that Harel apparently learned the secret of the cheese’s aging process from a recusant priest fleeing Revolutionary armies. Indeed, her grandson, Victor Paynel, would later, circa 1863, delight Emperor Napoleon III with a gift of Camembert.

Boisard’s discussion of the making of a “mythic object” is delightful, and he knows that in the absence of historical facts, tale-spinning filled in the gaps. The myth is still important because it involves the branding of the cheese as a Norman dairy product, as well as the use of an “ancestor cult” for commercial interests. The latter became extremely important in order to protect Camembert producers from label-switching counterfeiters at Les Halles market in Paris.

The struggle for control over the name Camembert by the descendants of Harel was complicated by the acceleration of the cheese’s commercial production outside the region of its so-called birth during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. What began as a “family affair” soon became a matter of industrial interest as Camembert production took off between 1850 and 1870. The early twentieth-century failures by family producers to win an appellation d’origine contrôlée (AOC, the official governmental designation of origin and quality) for Camembert meant that its Norman producers could not control its production. When a limited appellation was finally granted in 1983 for raw-milk, ladle-molded Camembert, the cause was already lost because no
Franco-American relations. The story of Camembert has much to teach us about milk. Norman Camembert was banned by the United States! “Industrial Camembert” (p. 188). Innovations in production techniques changed the face of Camembert as the former bluish gray rind acquired its “pristine” whiteness with the scientific study of the Penicillium family of molds (especially industrially produced “stable strains”). In some versions of the creation myth, this whiteness is dubiously attributed to Harel herself as a kind of “Immaculate Conception.” The white rind is, for Boisard, “a metaphor of the pasteurizing process” (p. 81).

Boisard engagingly details the “storm” of pasteurization that swept away much of traditional Norman cheese production during the 1950s and thereafter. Pasteurization means standardization and control over milk (stabilization of its acidity). Cheese making henceforth emerged from its rural origins as an art whose secrets were handed down orally within circumscribed familial boundaries to an industrial process in which a homogeneous product, the stuff of electromechanical engineers rather than dairymaids, finds its way to supermarket shelves everywhere. Nothing would be the same again. “I rarely eat supermarket Camembert,” Boisard admits (p. 167).

Industrial Camembert has erased even the mythic object itself. Boisard is certain of this: “Just to be perfectly clear, let us admit there is no such thing as a wholly traditional Camembert” (p. 191). Yet the desire for tradition, for myth making, becomes ever more feverish as industry takes command. This is most obvious on Camembert labels featuring folkloric images. This sense of tradition is mediated by industry because Camembert is a kind of hyphen between traditional folkways and modern production practices.

During World War II the statue of Marie Harel was decapitated during the accidental Allied bombardment of Vimoutiers. Again, American interests, led by dairy giant Borden, intervened and raised the money needed to replace the statue. The tragedy was not only that, as Boisard relates, the statue was incredibly awkward and ugly but also that the Borden company wanted the dedication to read: “To Marie Harel. This statue was the gift of the Borden Ohio Camembert Factory” (p. 209). As if this were not insulting enough, raw-milk Norman Camembert was banned by the United States! The story of Camembert has much to teach us about Franco-American relations.

——Gary Genosko, Department of Sociology, Lakehead University

Manly Meals and Mom’s Home Cooking: Cookbooks and Gender in Modern America
Jessamyn Neuhaus
Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003
x + 336 pp. Illustrations. $42.95 (cloth)

In Manly Meals and Mom’s Home Cooking Jessamyn Neuhaus argues that the rhetoric of American cookbooks, especially in the first half of the twentieth century, repeatedly constructed and reinforced middle-class white women’s place in the kitchen. Whether that rhetoric presented cooking as a domestic management project (as in the nineteenth century), a moral or patriotic duty (during both world wars and the Depression), a form of creative expression and “fun,” or the key to marital bliss and family contentment, over and over again women were told that cooking was their proper work, as if it were automatically linked to their gender. Neuhaus states that we can’t assume that all people who bought and used the cookbooks she studies accepted the ideology within them, yet she still believes that the rhetorical messages in these books were a major force in the social construction of women’s (and men’s) roles in society. Her central points about this ideological construct will not surprise anyone who has studied cookbooks or other instructional books directed at women, but her scholarship will help many readers understand the pervasive and persuasive rhetorical power of recipe books.

Manly Meals and Mom’s Home Cooking is arranged chronologically, beginning in the eighteenth century, when mother-daughter interactions and the oral tradition were more important than cookbooks; it then moves along to modern times, when specialty cookbooks offer instruction on everything from the basics of pie dough to exotic international cuisines. Neuhaus, a historian at Denison University, tracks changes in technologies of both the cookbooks themselves (authorship, illustrations, company sponsorships, introduction of specialty subjects, and so forth) and of food processing and appliances (from canned soups and Jell-O to cookstoves, refrigerators, and pressure cookers). She focuses on the influence of social and political forces like the Domestic Science movement of the nineteenth century, the rise of consumerism, middle-class women’s entrance into the work world and their changing relationships to domestic workers (both slaves and servants), and major national events like the Depression and the two world wars. Of special interest is the book’s second section, “You Are First and Foremost Homemakers: Cookbooks and the Second World War,” which details the way women were instructed to see cooking as their primary patriotic duty,