Truong’s depiction of colonial Vietnam conjures up the lushness of the culinary landscape of Binh’s homeland, but the narrative is more about Binh’s existence as a laborer, preparing meals for the governor-general in the colonial outposts of the French empire, as well as in the home of fellow (albeit more privileged) exiles, than it is about gratuitously describing the “exotic” appeal of Southeast Asian cuisines. Through memories of Binh’s mother in the kitchen, to his work with a chef in the kitchen at the governor-general’s residence in Saigon, to the seduction of his boss that fuels his exit to France on board the Niobe as the galley cook, and to his life in the Stein home, Truong affectively narrates how Binh’s life revolves around food, but specifically through his labor in culinary vocations.

With the appearance on bookshelves of novels such as Diana Abu-Jaber’s Crescent (2003), B Chitra Kirchners Pastries (2003), Ruth Ozeki’s “meat and potatoes” novels, My Year of Meats and All Over Creation (2003), and David Wong Louie’s The Barbarians Are Coming (2000), there is no shortage of writing that links the materiality of racial formation for Asian Americans with the affective register of culinary practices. Whereas Asian Americans have long been associated with their foodways, those deemed “exotic” and appetizing as well as those deemed viscerally offensive and unpalatable, this newer crop of culinary-themed novels is increasingly asking what it means to root and route one’s understanding of Asianness through culinary practice. In exemplary fashion Monique Truong’s debut novel recasts the terms through which we configure the relationship between food and Asianness, so that, instead of asking for what food can tell us about the cultural lives of Asians in diaspora, readers are obliged to reflect on how the positions of Asians in the global economy tells us something about the invisible labor behind our food cultures and how it comes to pass that Vietnamese subjects—real or imagined—who were denied agency and the means to speak, found their way into the hearts, palates, and homes of one of the most renowned culinary figures of mid-twentieth-century American exile culture.

—Anita Mannur, Wesleyan University

How We Eat: Appetite, Culture, and the Psychology of Food
Leon Rappaport
Toronto: ecw Press, 2003
224 pp. $15.95 (paper)

One need go no further than Freud to find a link between the topics of food and psychology, since it was he who identified the route by which our earliest experience of nursing provides us with a template for love. But Freud is not the only psychologist to see that food and what we feel about it is a key component of any full picture we might construct of the human psyche. For some, like Abraham Maslow, eating is a basic need that must be fulfilled before the higher needs can be attended to. Now we are in an era where grand theories are few and far between. Psychologists are subspecialists who tend to focus on very specific phenomena, such as eating disorders. Among other things this means that we tend to focus on the abnormal or problematic aspects of eating and ignore its role in basic (and healthy) psychological processes.

This means that the focus of Leon Rappaport’s book, How We Eat, is welcome, as much for its implicit message as for its specific content. The book, which covers a broad range of topics regarding the habits, values, and feelings people associate with food and eating, conveys the strong message that eating (and what surrounds it) is an essential and interesting part of everyday life. If we learn how people eat, we will understand a great deal more than that—we will learn what they value, how they deal with conflict, and what might differ between individuals and cultures. However, it also must be said that the book suffers from its greatest strength. Rappaport clearly wants to reach a wide audience and speak to them about a broad range of phenomena, which in his mind are related to one another. The book ranges from differences between cultures (he describes Parkman’s first taste of puppy dog on the Oregon trail and his wife’s encounter with German disdain for corn on the cob—“pig food”) to recent research linking the consumption of sugar to aggressive outbursts. This kind of breadth coupled with a wonderfully accessible style draws the book into superficiality.

The clues that it might have been otherwise appear early in the book when Rappaport tells us that his original interest in people’s eating customs grew out of his conviction that food was a vital bridge linking us to the natural world and that for the most part food experts (chefs, food writers, and food sociologists and psychologists) avoided the animal-like (“tooth and claw”) aspects of eating because it was simply “too bloody.” He also felt, early on in his scholarly endeavors, that food had become increasingly ambiguous as an expression of specific cultures in modern times (the globalization of cuisines and eating habits and the rapid shifts in cultures have watered down the customs and foods that might be a key to a specific community). The overall idea implicit in his original interest is that the way we eat is meaningful. However, as he began to do research for the book, he discovered that there was huge variety to the phenomena:
“instead of trying to find order in the endless diversity, one had to see that the diversity is the order and get on with mapping its psychological implications” (p.25). This preoccupation with diversity is, I think, a mistake, since it has led to a book that tries to cover far too many topics, facts, and points of view, without encouraging a deep or critical consideration of any of them. Scientific honesty may have pushed Rappaport away from a stronger theoretical framework, but it also weakened the power of this book.

Hence, his discussion of eating disorders barely skims the surface of what it means to the individual suffering from a disorder, the people around her, or those trying to treat her. As suggested by his book, it might be worth exploring the meanings of food, hunger, and satiation to all those affected by an individual’s eating disorder. But such a topic has no chance of emerging when it is mentioned in such a hurried way as the author moves on to yet another related topic.

In another part of the book, Rappaport touches on the ways in which parents try to socialize their children to use “good manners.” But he glides way too quickly from carefully culled observations and research to somewhat glib interpretations of anecdotal material (why we say that people eat like pigs, why parents worry what other adults will think of their children’s eating habits, and so on).

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How We Eat is fun to peruse because it contains so many small pieces of information that are interesting to those of us who love to cook, eat, and talk about food and eating. It probably will be most satisfying to read if one approaches it as a book about food with a psychological flavor, rather than as a psychological analysis of “how we eat.”

—Susan Engel, Williams College

Exploring the Tomato: Transformation of Nature, Society and Economy
Mark Harvey, Steve Quilley, and Hue Beynon
320 pp. $85.00 (cloth)

In the spring of 1993, I attended a New Jersey Museum of Agriculture benefit auction. I got twelve glass-and-wood cold frames from an earlier era for one dollar. Investigating a bit, I realized they were probably manufactured in the early part of the twentieth century for Campbell Soup Company contract farmers. In those days southern New Jersey had several thousand acres of Campbell Soup tomatoes in production. Times have changed; Campbell Soup cancelled their contracts with New Jersey growers and moved their sourcing. In many ways this book, an absolutely fascinating tale of food industrialization, brought home some of the forces driving those cold frames to my garden.

The world of food has changed dramatically since those cold frames were manufactured and used on contract-production farms. The authors illustrate this beautifully in a tale of tomato production, marketing, distribution, and consumption for the UK market. This volume continually reinforces that these four interrelated economic processes are neither independent nor strictly linear, but rather form a relational complex with one another. A constantly shifting array of people and new forms of technology interact to limit variation and surprise in the product stream. The tomato of today is a complex entity, no longer the “love apple” of yesteryear, but rather a red orb with various embedded social values and economic demands, in many ways a metaphor for standardization and consolidation in our global society. For those interested in more local, community-based food systems, slow food, and/or participatory democratic control, this book can be read as a cautionary tale of shifting yet continually concentrating economic forces.

Exploring the Tomato is not bent on examining the cultural history of the tomato in South America or its early European introduction. Rather, it is intended as a social-political-economic analysis largely within the twentieth century using the UK as a case study, and a fascinating story it is. Prior to the perfection of industrialized plate-glass production in 1853, tomato production was a hit-or-miss affair, with absolute dependency on climatic factors. Quickly, there was a rapid expansion of greenhouse development within a strong local-regional context, with small family businesses at the core.

Fast forward to post–World War II UK and we find British households receiving a large proportion of their fresh tomatoes from the island of Guernsey off the French coast. However, as the authors state, “The ‘Guernsey Tom,’ a specific bio-socio-economic species, had a meteoric rise followed by an equally rapid decline.” Historically, production was based on a large number of relatively small family holdings, all feeding the Guernsey Marketing Tomato Board (GMTB) distribution system. Uniformity of tomatoes was not the operative frame; the grading standards of GMTB acknowledged the large number of small farmers and resulting variability. By 1996 Guernsey production and export was less than 2 percent of the 1966 total. The decline in the seventies wasn’t due to any single factor in the global climate of tomato production but rather a number of external and internal factors, not least of which were the drive to greenhouse modernization and resulting consolidation, the oil crisis, and UK membership in the European Common Market. Production for