public health issues intersected. She finds that a multitude of interests are necessary to ensure public safety, especially given the indirect nature of scientific progress. However, she doesn’t address the cost of unpasteurized milk in terms of the resulting loss to gastronomy. This article, like several others, could have used better proofreading, as there are several typographical errors.

The second and third issues of Food and History are now available. All follow the same format, with a classic text, articles, and works in progress. As with the first issue, the majority of submissions deal with European subjects ranging from classical times to the twentieth century. The journal thus fills a very particular niche and provides good evidence that the field of food studies is flourishing as never before.

—Ken Albala, University of the Pacific

The Duchess Who Wouldn’t Sit Down: An Informal History of Informality
Jesse Browner
New York: Bloomsbury, 2003
198 pp. $23.95 (cloth)

An anecdote: years ago, a major French scholar of film theory—my primary area of study at the time—was trying to arrange a date for us to get together, while I was in Paris, to meet the next afternoon for an espresso; he declined and suggested that we instead pick a fine restaurant and have lunch together. Realizing the sanctity of gourmet mealtime for the gourmand French, I was flattered: I felt I was being admitted into some inner sanctum of distinction and privilege. He went on to explain that lunch was the only time he wasn’t reading or writing or reflecting deeply, and that he didn’t want to give up precious late-afternoon time for our conversation.

Based on my reading of The Duchess Who Wouldn’t Sit Down, I would like to believe that Jesse Browner would like this story. First, he appears to like pithy stories per se. Despite its subtitle, his book doesn’t so much offer a history (it is neither chronological, nor do its chapters arrange themselves into an overall logic) as it does a set of episodes from what would have to be a larger history. His volume appears as a set of great tales in which the foibles of hosting are outlined through memorable cases of success and failure. He ranges, for instance, over pre-Revolutionary royal festivities in France to the inhospitable times of the barbarian invasions of France to banquets in classic Greece to, even, Hitler’s private parties in his Nazi retreat. In all cases, Browner’s emphasis is on the opposite anecdote: the revealing happenstance, the moment-to-moment scenes in which the complexity of the act of hosting is unveiled.

Second, I envision that Browner would like my story since it traffics in the sorts of things he finds significant about hosting. In particular, as he establishes from his first anecdote (an autobiographical one in which he explains how he serves gourmet sandwiches at poker games with his buddies as he knows they will let their guard down upon tasting the delicacies), Browner argues that hospitality is rarely a giving and spontaneous act of open graciousness. Even when the host is not aware of this, hospitality is overwhelmingly determined by ulterior motives and is thus enacted as a series of tactics and calculations. As Browner states in the introduction to his volume: “What is important is that hospitality be seen not as a gift, but as the transaction that it is, a trade-off so subliminal even the host may not be aware that it has taken place, or of the ways in which it has profited him [sic]” (pp.7–8). In my story, for instance, the Frenchman was not so much inviting me to share in his appreciation of fine cuisine as he was calculating, through intellectual accountancy, that lunchtime was nonscholarly time that he could afford to give up.

Browner’s volume sets out to chronicle a number of cases in which hospitality unveils its strategic nature. Typical, for instance, is his examination of the welcoming of strangers into the home in ancient Greece: in Browner’s analysis, a strong reason for opening one’s domicile to strangers came from the fact that the Greek gods were known to disguise themselves as indigent, itinerant mortals and wander the earth to test people’s basic moral fiber. In such a context, it is far better to be nice to everyone since you might never know if you were dealing with a masquerading god.

Certainly, Browner appears at times to desire nobler motives for hospitality. Thus, for instance, one of his chapters ends with a veritable ode to Saint Julian who, according to legend, redeemed himself from an early life of dissoluteness and cruelty by giving sustenance and succor (including the offer of his own wife!) to a passing leper. In a volume so given to accounts of naked self-interest, the opposite of wanton exploitation of others, the tale of Saint Julian comes as a moment of relief. In Browner’s words, it stands as a narrative of “transformation and redemption [that] made possible the reawakening of a forgotten but cherished tradition that had lain dormant for many centuries” (p.128). But if the tale of Saint Julian represents an emergence of Western mores and moralities from the darkness of the Germanic dark ages,
it ultimately represents little more than an ill-fated moment, an evanescent respite within a larger framework of ongoing selfishness and cruelty towards one’s fellow beings. As Browner puts it bluntly and sardonically, with Julian “hospitality was back in business, just in time for capitalism, colonialism, gunpowder warfare, and the Renaissance” (p.129). In this respect, it may be useful for Browner to employ a nonchronological structure in his supposed “informal history”: in particular, by devoting the first chapter to Hitler’s great talents hosting parties at Berchtesgaden and putting guests at ease (even though a vegetarian, Hitler made sure they had meat if they so desired), Browner makes sure that all his accounts of earlier cases are framed by the reminder that humanity doesn’t necessarily become morally better and more enlightened as it approaches the modern age.

This cautionary quality in Browner’s tale-telling takes on special significance in the last chapter, where he recounts his own family dynamics around the dinner table. Browner’s mother, it seems, died pitifully after protracted illness, and Browner realizes the extent to which he withdrew his support from her as she became more and more debilitated. Everything came to a head when Browner and his siblings burst out in uncontrollable laughter at a meal where his mother tried to capture an errant brussels sprout that had fallen off of her fork. Writing from the vantage point of wistful maturity, Browner uses the story of his relationship to his mother to reflect broadly on what he terms “our strangu-lating covetousness, our cruelties, our pathetic moralities, our identities” (p.189).

It’s a delicate matter to be critical of such a heartfelt reflection on a family tragedy, but it might well be that this highly personal and guilt-ridden final chapter creates a problem with the book itself. Despite the way in which Browner used the other tales of his book to critique the culpability of motives that, in his view, suffuses hospitality, those narratives were always mediated by historical distance and by Browner’s whimsical way with anecdotal account. Now, however, he becomes overly serious and overly confessional, and the reader may feel that this intimate turn hasn’t really been settled (moreover, it might be noted that the story of his mother is only vaguely related to hospitality and the reception of guests).

*The Duchess Who Wouldn’t Sit Down* is a curious work that doesn’t seem to settle down to an easy or fixed identity. On the one hand, its claim to be a history is belied by its actual structure—a series of revelatory tales that use whimsy to chart classic cases around hospitality over the ages. On the other hand, its very whimsy is undercut by the autobiographical seriousness of its ending. With an enigmatic title that resembles others such as Oliver Sacks’s psychiatric The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Jeffrey Steingarten’s The Man Who Ate Everything, *The Duchess Who Wouldn’t Sit Down* is probably best viewed as part of a genre of works that offer up montages of anecdotes describing humanity’s foibles. These are books meant to be dipped into and out of and not perhaps taken too seriously. It’s unfortunate, then, that Browner felt impelled to end his generally amusing concoction on such a note of personal emotionalism.

—Dana Polan, University of Southern California

**The Secret Life of Lobsters: How Fishermen and Scientists Are Unraveling the Mysteries of Our Favorite Crustacean**

Trevor Corson


289 pp. $24.95 (cloth)

Defying the accepted wisdom that people prefer to know as little as possible about the food they eat, Trevor Corson’s captivating (and appetite-whetting) book, *The Secret Life of Lobsters*, examines in minute detail every level of the Maine lobster trade, from larva to lobster bib. Corson, a Boston native who passed his childhood summers on Little Cranberry Island off the coast of Maine, returned as an adult to spend two years working on a lobster boat belonging to Bruce Fernald, a fifth-generation lobsterman. During that time he came to know intimately not only the lobstermen and their families but also a group of scientists studying the area’s lobster population and attempting to unravel the dark undersea mysteries of crustacean life and death. As well as offering a paean to lobsters and lobstermen, *The Secret Life of Lobsters* has a polemical motivation: to argue against the Maine government’s position that the lobster population is being overfished and is in danger of declining in the way the cod population has over the past twenty years.

According to Corson, the conservation techniques regularly employed by the Maine lobstermen, such as v-notching—cutting a V in the tail of a breeding female to mark her as a protected animal for life—effectively sustain lobster population levels. Corson argues that any fluctuations in lobster numbers are natural, owing to the crustacean’s dependence on fluctuating natural factors such as water temperature and current. His argument is convincing, despite an obvious bias, but the most juicy and rewarding sections of the book (the tail meat, as it were) are not the overly detailed accounts of clashes between the lobstermen and the government scientists, nor even his loving depictions of life on