Little Cranberry, but rather the obsessively, beautifully written descriptions of the lobster's social life. One can easily see where Corson's heart lies, and the surrounding narrative, despite many charming and occasionally chilling anecdotes about lobstermen and scientists, tends to lack the visceral fascination and energy of the corresponding anecdotes about lobsters.

The book is organized around six different phases of a lobster's experience: trapping, mating, fighting, surviving, sensing, and brooding. After a prologue describing life on a lobster boat, the first section, "Trapping," provides a short history of the lobster trade in Maine. This section also introduces some curious facts about lobster growth: for example, lobsters molt regularly, shedding their old shells, eating them for the calcium, then growing a new shell as they expand in size, with each molting cycle gaining them 15 percent in length and 50 percent in size. "Mating," the following section, outlines a history of research into the lobster sex life, interspersing oddly erotic descriptions of lobster mating practices with a far less graphic retelling of Bruce Fernald's wooing of his wife, Barb. The third section, "Fighting," delves into the conflicts between government and lobstermen in Maine, focusing on the government's concern over the paucity of mature lobsters in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This section is the longest and the hardest to read, exemplifying Corson's tendency to get bogged down in the details of the back-and-forth exchanges between government scientists, lobstermen, and independent ecologists like Robert Steneck.

Part four, "Surviving," returns to descriptions of the lobster, namely its early development as a postlarval "super-lobster," as well as the superlobster's particular need for sheltering terrain, an element determining population sizes on the Maine coast. "Sensing," begins with an enthralling description of the remarkable structure of the lobster's eye and closes with new developments in lobster-mating research as well as in undersea robotics based on lobsters. The final section, "Brooding," describes a boom and bust in the lobster population, concluding that, despite great advancements in technology, "declines caused by the vagaries of ocean currents or the shifting forces of climatic oscillations would be impossible to predict" (p.266). Corson ends his book with a useful appendix called "How to Eat a Lobster," including a short recipe (water, no salt, lobster) and a defense of the peta-condemned method of steaming lobsters alive. Lobsters, he writes, have a nervous system no more complicated than that of "an ant, a housefly, or a mosquito" (p.276). Moreover, we should appreciate the lesson lobsters teach us: "killing the animal we eat offers the rare chance to acknowledge the philosophical and perhaps even spiritual dimensions of the web of life that sustains us—all from the safety of our kitchens." (p.278).

Corson's compelling, if overcramped, book provides a rare and often hilarious glimpse of this obscure animal. (Who knew lobsters urinated in each other's faces to attract mates?) Despite the putative simplicity of the lobster's nervous system, I finished this book with a contrary sense of the creature's complexity and even sentience, owing to a descriptive approach that sometimes verges on soap opera. Corson's arguments may occasionally become muddy, but his sparkingly clear vision of the lobster is impossible to forget.

—Britt Peterson, Cambridge University

Stalking the Green Fairy:
And Other Fantastical Adventures in Food and Drink
James Villas
Foreword by Jeremiah Tower
Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2004
vii + 310 pp. $26.95

As a writer and a lover of food, James Villas has split personalities. A renowned author with a weakness for alliterative titles—three of his recent books are Between Bites, Crazy for Casseroles, and Biscuit Bliss—Villas is not modest about his thoroughgoing knowledge. Writing about his experiences in the food world in the introduction to Stalking the Green Fairy, Villas informs the reader, "I've witnessed it all, involved myself intensely in most of the activity, and recorded any aspect that has aroused my curiosity" (pp.3–4).

But Villas is also a dining room populist: The former longtime food and wine editor at Town & Country magazine is mad about the club sandwich and rails against those who look down their noses at iceberg lettuce. He even concedes that the Hard Rock Cafe and the Olive Garden "can actually turn out some pretty tasty food" (p.258), and he buys some of his groceries in bulk from a discount price club.

This dichotomy makes Villas's Green Fairy a gratifying read. If at times a bit pompous—he boasts that he can greet maitre d's in ten languages—Villas is a well-informed guide, a very good writer, and never less than a sharply opinionated and enthusiastic guide.

The essays that make up this book are about, among other things, meatloaf and steak, okra and pumpkin, champagne and beer, the ethics of tipping, and how best to get a tough table. ("I've determined," Villas writes, "that the most advantageous time to call for a difficult reservation is about thirty minutes after the lunch rush, or between 2:30
and 3:00 in the afternoon” [p.281]). Appended to most of the essays are recipes for everything from clam chowder to tiramisu to venison pie. One essay finds Villas praising peanut butter; he always has “at least two jars in the house” (p.129). In another he offers a hearty defense of potato salad, and yet another makes the idiosyncratic argument that onion soup is the “sexiest food on earth” (p.170). All the while, Villas garnishes his book with good-natured gossip about the stars of the food world: Jacques Pépin, Villas reports, loves his cheeseburgers, and Julia Child seems to have had a weakness for Pepperidge Farm Goldfish.

One of the book’s stronger essays provides the collection with its title. Villas laments the fact that absinthe, the powerful liqueur known as “the green fairy,” remains illegal in America; its outlaw status comes from the fact that it contains small amounts of thujone, a potentially mind-altering oil that comes from wormwood. But he predicts that the drink, a favorite of prominent artists of days gone by, will make a comeback. “If the drinking habits of roguish sophisticates and younger, adventurous trendsetters serve as a benchmark, that which was once know worldwide as the Green Fairy will resurface to captivate drinkers as much as it did well over a century ago” (p.207).

Villas is most engaging when he turns skeptical toward some of the foolishness that occasionally accompanies contemporary high-end dining. In one of the book’s best essays, “Dining in the Playpen,” the author excoriates dilettantish restaurateurs for creating culinary sideshows that are marked by frivolity. “And what do I mean by a playpen?” Villas writes, adding a healthy does of sarcasm, “Well, it’s a venue that takes shape when someone with little or no professional experience decides to open a snazzy, usually overpriced restaurant, come up with a name that might be better suited to a TV sitcom, and then hires a high-profile decorator to create something out of a fantasy (and probably best kept there). The post-pubescent chef, preferably a pedigreed culinary school graduate, is generally lured from another similar-style restaurant to fashion his or her eclectic version of ‘New American,’ ‘Mediterranean,’ or global ‘fusion’ cuisine, hopefully free of salt, cream, butter, flour, and all those other poisons” (p.259).

However, Villas is not a things-were-so-much-better-in-the-old-days curmudgeon. As he writes at the outset, “Never has world gastronomy been more vibrant and challenging than during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries…” (p.3). He’s right, of course, and his enthusiasm for food and drink is this fine book’s defining quality.

—Kevin Canfield, New York, NY

Feeding London: A Taste of History
Richard Tames
London: Historical Publications Ltd, 2003
208 pp. Illustrations. $28.00 (cloth)

If Washington, New York, Chicago, and San Francisco were to put in a pot and stirred, the mixture would not yield one London, a place of endless variety, as is obvious from this very fine account of feeding that city down through the centuries. I was impressed by a number of things in reading this book: (1) the vast appetite of London, even from earliest times, as where a Venetian merchant observed in 1562: “It is almost impossible to believe that they could eat so much meat in one city alone” (p.7); (2) the industries and products that resulted from this appetite, creating jobs there and abroad, and the part unfettered enterprise, exercised by people of initiative and imagination, played in all this; (3) the attraction of London for those seeking political and religious freedom, and the way that affected diet, cooking styles, and the demand for products from abroad. When I studied history in college, the chapters that treated the subject matter of this book bored me to no end. Now I feel that anyone who does not thrill at the sight of commerce in action, especially in a port city, is sorely lacking in some respect. London is less of a port than formerly, but one can easily imagine how it once throbbed with life.

Richard Tames begins his narrative with the Romans. On reading of what they ate, you will probably gain a greater appreciation of them than you would from viewing a remnant of a Roman wall, which might only produce a yawn. For all the various ages of Britain, Tames gives us a survey, in easily digestible portions, of how those of both high and low estate lived. All these ages and practices are well illustrated by woodcuts, paintings, and photographs. Literary references, both ancient and modern, will lead you in many directions, and there are also many useful cross-references within the book.

The chapter “Theory and Practice” traces the history of various cookbooks from Pynson’s Boke of Cookery (1500) to Hannah Woolley’s The Gentlewoman’s Companion or a Guide to the Female Sex (1672) to the celebrated Mrs. Beeton (1836–1869). We learn of William Kitchener (d.1827), a writer after my own heart, who organized a dinner group called the “Committee of Taste,” in which “lateness was regarded as unforgivable and punished accordingly” (p.57). In this chapter you will also meet the famed cook Rosa Lewis, who in 1893 “married, for calculated reasons of her own,” a butler whose most impressive feature was his name—Excelsior Tyrel Chiney Lewis (p.69).