Among textual discussions I found suggestive were Warnes’s treatments of the spoiled dinner scene in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—as when he asks us to consider whether protagonist Janie had indeed poisoned her husband—or whether Morrison’s *Tar Baby* opens an intertextual dialogue with the film melodrama *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?* Intriguing ideas, both of them, yet finally unsatisfying because the author does not go far enough: for one, readers might find the first discussion more convincing were the author also to analyze the shooting death of Janie’s second husband (admittedly she killed him in self-defense, but it could make the earlier exegesis that much more compelling). Interesting, but less successful, are digressive excursions on the authorship of Joel Chandler Harris and on oranges in early modern Anglophone exploration narratives.

Let me return to my earlier cavils and repent, slightly: there is nothing inherently wrong with Warnes’s somewhat functionalist approach. Nonetheless, Warnes, having entered the conversations in African American and food studies, needs to be ready for critique from these quarters. I was puzzled by Warnes’s apparent lack of familiarity with certain ongoing discussions. For example, when he speaks of the Cartesian duality and its subsequent denigration of gendered-female “cultural practices,” I was surprised that no reference was made to Lisa Heldke, to name just one scholar studying this problem; in writing of the British predilection for sweets and its implication in the plantation slavery system and concomitant racism, Warnes quotes British scholars Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy but barely mentions Sidney Mintz, much less engages his argument; high-profile African Americanists like Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Barbara Johnson are regularly cited, but Nellie McKay, a noted Morrison scholar (one who has published on Hurston as well), is not even listed in the bibliography. The author does enthusiastically engage the scholarship of Doris Witt and treats an essay by this reviewer as well—he is clearly not unaware. Still, an Anglophilic (or should I say commonwealth-philic?) bias seems to power Warnes’s research. To be fair, this slant may simply reflect the author’s geographical position: living and researching in the United Kingdom, he may be somewhat hampered by lack of access to texts. Perhaps a greater use of Internet databases would have yielded more robust results.

Whether Morrison, Wright, and Hurston can save the hungry in America—or anywhere else—remains inconclusive. Still, I relish the idea, more than two hundred years after Phillis Wheatley first published verses linking American liberty and black freedom, that the black pen can ultimately serve to liberate. In that, Warnes and I are truly in concert.

—Rafa Zafar, Washington University in St. Louis

**The Empire of Tea: The Remarkable History of the Plant That Took Over the World**
Alan Macfarlane and Iris Macfarlane
New York: The Overlook Press, 2004
308 pp. $22.95 (cloth)

Personal tussles with the socioeconomic effects of tea production underpin much of *The Empire of Tea* by Alan Macfarlane and his mother, Iris. Iris spent her early married life struggling with frustration on a tea plantation in India. Alan remembers his pleasurable childhood there, never realizing that the workers’ backbreaking efforts paid for his expensive British education. Now, he speculates that since the Industrial Revolution occurred soon after the English working class took to serious tea drinking, there may be a causal link.

Macfarlane explores this hypothesis by tracing both the history of tea and the health effects of drinking it. Most significantly, he notes that tea is safe because it must be made from boiling water. Thus, in the cities of eighth-century China, tea drinkers did not fall victim to the epidemics of dysentery, typhoid, and other waterborne diseases—an effect repeated nearly a thousand years later when tea arrived in Europe.

The first purchasers of tea were wealthy sophisticates eager to try anything new. But by 1750 when faster, more reliable ships (though not the clippers cited by Macfarlane) began trading with China, even the working class could afford tea, and like the Chinese, city dwellers were discovering that they were less subject to the intestinal illnesses caused by polluted water. Thus, tea certainly improved the health and hence fostered urban civilization in countries where it became the standard everyday beverage.

To this point Macfarlane follows the well-known history of the Chinese origins of tea, its arrival in Europe, and its emergence as Britain’s primary drink. Less familiar is the development of the Indian tea industry, a staggeringly successful British project to break the Chinese monopoly on tea.

The British began growing tea in Assam in the 1820s. By the 1860s they had introduced the harsh but efficient production methods pioneered in Britain’s factories. Tea bushes and workers’ cottages marched in straight lines. Hours were long and tasks specialized. Workers were transported hundreds of miles from their homes and had to sign onerous, incomprehensible, and unbreakable contracts. As for the managers, men with meager financial prospects in Britain went to India in droves. Tea companies paid good salaries and provided lavish homes staffed by hordes of servants. Like the laborers, managers risked dying of malaria and other
tropical diseases, but unlike them, the survivors got rich. Alan Macfarlane’s father was one such manager.

Ranging from its treasury of quotations from travelers amazed at the tea-drinking enthusiasm in Britain, China, and Japan to its interviews with the Indian managers who have taken over where the British left off, The Empire of Tea scintillates with gems of eyewitness detail and is never less than engrossing. Yet Macfarlane often claims too much. His subtitle—The Remarkable History of the Plant that Took Over the World—implies a more global consideration of tea than this survey of Chinese and Assamese tea-growing and British tea-drinking warrants. The book has nothing to say about tea in such tea-drinking cultures as Russia, Turkey, or North Africa, and it does no more than mention the colonial Dutch tea plantations in Java, even though they spurred on the British in Assam.

More seriously, Macfarlane tends to push evidence too far, most notably in the assertion that “without tea the British Empire and British industrialism could not have emerged” (p. 99). That the taxes and profits on tea helped sustain the Empire is incontrovertible, but so did the profits on cotton, sugar, chocolate, rubber, diamonds, and slaves. That the iconic “nice cuppa tea” buoyed tired workers is equally incontrovertible, and this must have helped the Industrial Revolution on its way. But singling out tea—or any single factor—as crucial ignores the interplay of numerous causes. These include eighteenth-century advances in transportation and machinery and the existence of an empire to provide raw materials and consume finished goods—all this a century before India produced tea or the working classes were able to drink the huge quantities they later consumed.

Equally egregious is Macfarlane’s discussion of the health benefits of tea, devoting the whole of chapter thirteen to the topic. He begins, “The extraordinary fact about tea is that it turns out to be the most important and powerful medical substance on earth” (p. 255), substantiating this enormous claim with recent studies indicating that tea drinkers enjoy lower rates of heart disease, stroke, and cancer. But while these studies are suggestive, Macfarlane undermines his claims—and his own hypothesis—by quoting from British newspaper reports rather than from the medical journals in which the data were published.

These caveats notwithstanding, The Empire of Tea is a sprightly and compellingly readable book, and its history of the Assamese tea plantations, enriched as it is by the authors’ own experiences, is a valuable contribution to our knowledge of tea production.

—Claire Hopley, author, New England Cooking: Seasons and Celebrations

Super Chefs: The Making of the Great Modern Restaurant Empires
Juliette Rossant
New York: Free Press, 2004
xiii + 236 pp. Illustrations. $25.00 (cloth)

One of the primary considerations when writing human profiles, as when writing wine lists, is breadth or depth. In her book Super Chef: The Making of the Great Restaurant Empires, Juliette Rossant has opted for the former over the latter. The author’s stated purpose for the book is to tell tales of “wonder and adventure” instead of focusing on “hot food or cold commerce” (p. xi). Ms. Rossant argues in her introduction that the food persona and products of these individuals have been given ample media coverage and that an examination of the business side of these people would be interesting. Unfortunately, what follows are profiles of celebrity chefs that read more like narrative resumes than tales of wonder and adventure.

The author speaks to her limitations in the introduction of the book. She admits she is dealing with privately held companies and did not have “the benefit of a clear-cut financial picture such as an annual report with a balance sheet of assets and liabilities” (p. xii). This situation limits her ability to evaluate success and failure in real dollar terms and causes her to rely on anecdotal evidence for her interpretation of outcomes. Although interviewees are likely to be less forthright about their mistakes than their successes, too many of the descriptions of their failures are limited to sentences such as the one describing Wolfgang Puck’s empire: “In 1994, Wolfgang opened Spago Mexico City, but the deal fizzled” (p. 23)—end of topic. Other complex deals are similarly dispensed with in one or two sentences. A more thorough book would have fleshed out the details, given us more particulars, explored the motives and actions of the principals, allowed us to understand the fine points that need to go right to succeed, and discussed how even one or two of them going wrong can sink a project.

Interestingly, the most compelling portrait regards the only women included by Rossant, Mary Sue Milliken and Susan Feniger, who share the next-to-last profile in the book. Milliken and Feniger are drawn with greater compassion and dimension than the other subjects, and we are treated to more of their dreams, hopes, and frustrations, along with greater insight into their decision-making. According to the profiles in this book, Milliken and Feniger have faced more adversity and setbacks in their careers than the other chefs profiled, and Super Chefs makes it sound as though their financial position is less secure than that of the other subjects.