Dalby’s caveat is valid—these writers were known to tease—but fortunately he never makes fun of his readers. He writes with true erudition combined with downright common sense. For example, he is not afraid to give us the cold truth about John Dory, a “sea fish of distinctive physiognomy—ugly would be another way to put it—and with fine-tasting flesh…” (p.186). When Dalby tackles garum, he warns us not to try the recipes at home because “the result may contain carcinogens” (p.157). Other interesting entries, such as those dealing with elements central to dining and feasting in antiquity, for example, trielium, are sure to become classic references in future works on ancient food and culinary science in general. Dalby even does justice to ubiquitous foodstuffs like the oyster.

Although I joyfully devoured the excellent bibliography, relished the wonderful illustrations (including maps and sketches from Greek vases), and savored the rich indices of classical Latin and Greek names, I wished Dalby (and his editor) had cooked up some sort of cross-referenced index of all the entries. The section on wine and grapes, for example, would be far more useful if there were a straightforward list of all the wines mentioned and their corresponding varietals.

In his postscript to the book, Dalby notes in the future works he intends to transliterate proper names directly from Greek instead of Latinizing them, as he does in Food in the Ancient World. He regrets not doing so in this work, especially since this is a new trend in classical scholarship. Do his comments augur more works on food in the ancient world? Only the Sibyl knows for sure. We can only hope Dalby is mad enough to keep at it.

—Jeremy Parzen, New York, NY

Spice: The History of a Temptation
Jack Turner
New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004
xxiv + 384 pp. Photographs. $26.95

The late 1400s saw an explosion of exploration—and a transformation of the world—as Christopher Columbus, Vasco da Gama, and other seafaring entrepreneurs sought new routes to India’s Malabar Coast and the Indonesian archipelago. The object of their efforts? Spice—namely, pepper, cinnamon, nutmeg, clove, and a few other buds and seeds. In the ensuing years, the Spanish, the Portuguese, the English, and the Dutch would all seek to dominate the spice trade, using astonishing bloodshed and brutality to achieve their aims, undermined only by pirates who would occasionally plunder spice boats of their precious cargo.

But why all the fuss about spice? “In an age that pours its commercial energies into such unpoetical ends as arms, oil, [and] ore,” notes author Jack Turner, the drive to obtain “anything quite so quaintly insignificant as spice must strike us as mystifying indeed” (p.xii). While historians often point to medieval Europe’s problems with rancid meat, along with the mind-numbing repetitiveness of its diet, as the source of spice’s early popularity, Turner argues its appeal came down to one simple thing: mystery. “[Spices] were, in a sense, magical if not divine,” he writes, “arriving by unknown means from the vast blank spaces on the map, spaces populated by dragons, gods, and monsters. From mystery grew mystique” (p.231).

It’s a seductive premise. And Turner, employing an entertaining, showy style, just manages to pull it off, getting his arms around an ungainly topic and barely keeping the story out in front of the tongue-twisting prose. He starts by examining the rise of Europe’s economy after the first millennium and the subsequent demand for Eastern luxuries. Ginger, mace, and other exotic ingredients quickly became status symbols among noblemen—not unlike furs or jewels—as well as staples in upper-class kitchens, with nearly every dish deluged by seasonings, to the point where the medieval appetite for spice looked “less like a taste than an addiction” (p.107). It was also believed that ingesting spices was a way to improve one’s health and that they could cure everything from gangrene and paralysis to constipation and lung disease.

Then there’s sex. Spice has long been associated with eroticism, including recent examples like the pop-music sex kittens the Spice Girls and the Spice soft-porn cable TV station. (“I first took it for a cooking channel,” says Turner [p.xii].) In the Middle Ages—when noblemen’s fear of
infertility ran rampant—spices were widely believed to serve as aphrodisiacs, with one prominent sexologist recommending cloves steeped in milk for a morning erection; another, citing the Kama Sutra, advocated applying ground pepper directly to the penis just before intercourse. Turner, no doubt chuckling along with the reader, also mentions a modern-day American researcher, James Leslie McCary, who conducted a study to test the seductive powers of a fine meal, enticing subjects with a fragrant sauce of cloves and cinnamon. More than half the participants found the dish to be “very ‘sexy’” (p. 213).

It was these very qualities, Turner continues, that led many medieval Christian leaders to denounce spices—ginger in particular—arguing that their corrupting influence undermined monks’ vows of celibacy, with one mystic even comparing them to the forbidden apple of Eden. Others claimed their overuse could lead to “drying out, derangement, and even death” (p. 195). The most puritan critics saw spice as nothing less than an affront to God, who had already met man’s basic needs by providing local foods, a gift cooks were now tampering with by introducing foreign flavors. “The spice eater was not merely a glutton,” Turner writes, “worshipping the false god of his stomach; he was guilty of the Luciferian sin of rebellion” (p. 285).

Turner conducted an extraordinary amount of research on his topic, documented in the bibliography at the rear of the book, and as a result the story takes some comical and surprising turns, including an analysis of spice as a medieval perfume, with the most spicy, most expensive varieties favored among the social elite. He also explores the use of spices in mummification and in embalming techniques favored among the social elite. He also explores the use of spices in mummification and in embalming techniques that followed in future centuries, tracing the practice back to Ramses II, an Egyptian pharaoh who died in 1224 B.C.; an examination of his remains revealed peppercorns stuffed up his large, crooked nose, startling scientists. “How [the pepper] got there,” Turner observes, “or who had brought it, is unknowable” (p. 146).

Despite efforts by the Dutch to maintain their monopoly of spice farms and prevent propagation, products like cloves and nutmeg eventually spread to other regions of the world—thanks largely to Spanish and Portuguese smugglers—reducing them to mere commodities and diminishing their intrigue and notoriety, not to mention their cost. By the early 1600s, pepper in particular had long since become available to the European masses, prompting the nobility to lose interest. At the same time, crops like tomatoes and chilies, brought back from the New World, were broadening the European diet and creating new options for cooks. A shift to simple, fresh, local ingredients—to foods that tasted like themselves—was underway, a transformation nowhere as successful as in Italy, where simplicity remains the quintessence of its cuisine.

As a result, the heavily spiced meals of the Middle Ages fell from favor. Once the province of aristocracy, spice became just the opposite. “In the modern world,” Turner notes, “it tends to be the poor, not the rich, who eat spices” (p. 309).

Turner is a talented, ambitious writer, with a knack and fondness for wordplay that, here, almost gets in the way, but not quite. Written obviously from a Western point of view, Spice is a dense read requiring patience, especially as the author indulges the outrageous and dispenses with chronology, jumping back and forth in time. But the book’s impressive scope makes it a must-read for food history buffs and puts it a step above dusty history. And Turner, drawing on his classical studies at Melbourne University, adds an exceptionally literary touch, with references to the likes of Homer, Chaucer, and Shakespeare, helping to enrich and elevate the discussion.

—Andy Boynton, Tacoma, WA

Tsukiji: The Fish Market at the Center of the World
Theodore C. Bestor
Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004
xxviii + 411 pp. Illustrations. $60.00 (cloth) / $24.95 (paper)

Ever seen an eight-hundred-pound piece of sushi? If not, hit the Tsukiji fish market in Tokyo at five in the morning. Laid out in neat rows are giant tuna, four to five feet long. Some are fresh, flown in from Boston the night before, glistening under the fluorescent lights. Others were flash frozen weeks earlier at minus sixty degrees Celsius, perhaps aboard a boat somewhere in the Indian Ocean, and they smoke with frost. The auction bell rings, and a tightly wound boatswain man steps on a stool and spits out a string of staccato chants. Stone-faced traders flick their fingers in discreet hand gestures. At this point, you should keep your hands in your pockets, because the wrong fish could set you back forty thousand dollars. Better to sample the fish later—a Tsukiji wordsman has attacked it with his industrial table saw and three-foot fillet blade—as a thin, succulent slice on rice at one of Tokyo’s finer sushi shops.

Theodore Bestor, an anthropologist at Harvard University, spent so much time at Tsukiji over a period of several years that many of the market’s personnel came to recognize him. That’s saying something, since roughly fifty thousand people do business there every day. Tsukiji is the largest seafood