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.193). 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.83).

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 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 mid-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.209).

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 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 swordsman 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
market in the world, a maze of halls, stalls, and alleyways under rusting roofs, sprawling across fifty acres of concrete. Bestor writes that six mornings a week, between the hours of four and ten, Tsukiji is “a maelstrom of frenetic motion and industrial-strength noise, high-tech electronics and nearly preindustrial manual labor” (p.9). As I read these words, they brought to mind the several mornings of seafood insanity I’d survived wandering Tsukiji myself, at no small risk to my own safety. I once worked as a commercial fisherman for two years, and I lived in Japan for three, but to this day I have never experienced anything as extraordinary as the chaos at Tsukiji, though I had no idea what it all meant when I was there.

Bestor decodes the Tsukiji ruckus and slices it into bite-sized chunks: the seven auction houses that funnel marine fauna from around the globe onto their auction floors; the 1,677 wholesale traders who bid on the exotic goodies and rush back to their family-run stalls to hawk their specialties; the thirty thousand sushi chefs, restaurateurs, retail fishmongers, peddlers, caterers, and box lunch makers who peruse the stalls each morning to replenish their pantries; and the ranks of laborers who truck and cart the day’s five million pounds of seafood into the market’s docking bays and through its twisting alleys. Bestor flavors his text with personal portraits of characters who inhabit these different worlds of Tsukiji life, using anecdotes to illustrate the intricate economic and social relationships that make the market tick. And he puts a stopwatch to Tsukiji: “The rhythms of the marketplace are delicately governed by the logic of the human stomach,” Bestor discovers, “through the daily shopping behavior of millions of cooks” (p.50). The result is that Tsukiji’s own restaurants must open for breakfast around eleven at night and that its traders wash their dinner down with beer before noon, seven or eight hours ahead of the rest of Japan.

The origins of Tsukiji predate sushi itself, as Bestor explains in a chapter on the market’s history. Legend has it that around 1600 a village of thirty fishermen earned special trading privileges in exchange for their loyalty to the shogun and set up shop not far from today’s market. Bestor met a few traders who could trace their businesses back more than twenty generations. Sometime in the 1600s, Japanese seafood lovers—perhaps the ones who lived inland—realized fresh fish would keep if packed in rice, thanks to natural fermentation. The combination of fish and rice caught on, but sushi as we know it—slivers of raw fish atop tiny blocks of vinegared rice—wasn’t invented until the 1820s when nigiri-zushi suddenly became all the rage in Tokyo.

Tsukiji’s history leads Bestor to another chapter on the relationship between the Japanese people and their food today. In Bestor’s analysis, the Tsukiji traders “regard themselves as stewards of Japan’s culinary heritage” (p.128), a role that isn’t as straightforward as it sounds. For example, how do you even define the cuisine in question, considering most of the items sold at Tsukiji never even get cooked? Bestor suggests the art of serving raw fish may have more in common with the tending of a Zen garden than it does with the active manipulation of ingredients we associate with, say, French gastronomy. What’s worse, Japanese culinary culture is changing rapidly. In Tokyo, 7-Eleven stores now stock sushi, and shoppers prefer the anonymity of the supermarket to the familiarity of the local fishmonger. Moreover, traditional Japanese fare is shedding cachet as today’s homemakers experiment with Thai, Indian, and Italian culinary arts. Tsukiji itself may even disappear; a plan is afoot to relocate the market to a high-tech facility removed from downtown Tokyo—to say nothing of the fact that the fish themselves are being overharvested toward extinction.

Bestor is a scholar, and his book isn’t for everyone; the four hundred pages brim with academic excursions into such esoterica as obligational contracting, upstream integration, and segmentary cartels. But there are nuggets of fun scattered throughout, and the book represents a heroic accomplishment of anthropological sleuthing. And for the intrepid sushi lover, Bestor includes a guide for visiting Tsukiji yourself. Do you dare? My advice: go while you still can. There is nothing like it. Get up early, and watch out for the eight-hundred-pound fish.

—Trevor Corson, author, The Secret Life of Lobsters

Yamazato: Kaiseki Cuisine, Hotel Okura Amsterdam
Akira Oshima, Patrick Faas, and Katarzyna Cwiertka
Photographs by Bart Van Leuven
Oostkamp, Belgium: Stichting Kunstboek, 2003
102 pp. Photographs. € 49.90 (cloth)

For those who regularly eat at Japanese restaurants in the United States, the word kaiseki has come to mean a formal, pricey meal—one that most likely includes several unidentified (and possibly unappreciated) delicacies. In restaurants outside of Japan, the manner in which a kaiseki meal is served—the progression of dishes and the timing of the presentation—tends to be a compromise between Japanese conventions (soup with rice and pickles conclude formal Japanese meals) and local expectations (a meal begins with soup and concludes with dessert).