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 specialty; 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 walks 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 vinegar-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 obligatory contracting, upstream integration, and segmentary cartels. But there are nuggets of fun scattered throughout, and the book represents a heroic accomplishment of anthropological sleuthing. 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
192 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 unidentifiable (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).
In Japanese the word *kaiseki* can be written in two ways, each calling to mind a slightly different image. One set of calligraphy links “meet” with “seat,” and the other combines “chest pocket” with “stone.” The former pair conjures up a multicourse banquet, while the latter, an unlikely grouping of calligraphy, describes an ancient practice of placing warm stones against one’s abdomen to keep hunger pangs at bay. Sen no Rikyu, the sixteenth-century gentleman credited with having begun what is today called the Tea Ceremony, used this unusual set of calligraphy to describe the food—*kaiseki* cuisine—that eliminated hunger (and the need for these chest pocket stones). In *Yamazato: Kaiseki Cuisine, Hotel Okura Amsterdam*, these distinctions are referred to as “banqueting *kaiseki*” (*enkaiseki*) and “tea *kaiseki*” (*chakaiseki*), respectively.

Despite the title, very little text is actually devoted to explaining the difference between the two types of *kaiseki*, or to placing the subject of *kaiseki* in context among other Japanese culinary notions. In this book, much of what is attributed to *kaiseki* philosophy and practice—for example, balancing the use of five colors; engaging all the senses, not just taste and smell; the importance and pervasiveness of seasonality—holds true for all Japanese cuisine, even informal fare prepared by home cooks.

*Yamazato* is exquisitely produced, with striking, and abundant, full-color photographs by Bart Van Leuven. However, the accompanying text is disappointing—and not because the authors lack knowledge of, or passion for, their subject; Chef Oshima, Mr. Faas, and Dr. Cwiertka are recognized experts. The fault, I believe, is editorial—an intrusive agenda combined with less-than-meticulous line editing. Femke De Lameillieure is credited with “final editing,” but I found myself wondering just what that meant.

The choice and organization of topics for inclusion in this volume would have benefited from a commercial-free stance. A biographical sketch of Baron Okura (founder of the hotel chain by the same name); esoteric descriptions of menus matched to Japanese festivals; and a brief description of sushi, cel cookery, and condiments seem an odd, and arbitrary, collection—unless this publication was conceived of as a promotional vehicle for the hotel’s restaurant, *Yamazato*, in which case it makes perfect sense (the absence of a price printed on the book jacket reinforces this feeling). A fairly common practice in Japan, vanity publications typically lavish resources on stunning visuals and give short shrift to the written word.

Had there been an editor familiar with American readers and their expectations, that person would have toned down—or better yet, eliminated—the ingratiating hyperbole that is so liberally sprinkled throughout the book (a statement such as “Thanks to the dedication of the [Yamazato] cooks and of the cooks flown in from Japan to demonstrate their art under the supervision of the Okura’s chef Akira Oshima, Amsterdam has witnessed previously unknown culinary moments…the attention that was given to acquiring the highest quality ingredients, as well as the total dedication given to their preparation and presentation, finally conquered the hearts of the Europeans” is irritating, at best [p.18]).

Had someone been in charge of correcting syntax, many misleading assertions could have been avoided. Take, for example, this statement: “Unlike vegetarian cuisines in China, in *shoujin ryouri* no attempts are made to imitate meat dishes—like duck, chicken and pork made of gluten” (p.127). Perhaps those readers familiar with Japan’s *shoujin ryouri* (temple vegetarian cuisine) can ignore the faulty grammar without dire consequence, but novices will be misled. It is true that imitation duck, chicken, and pork are not made from gluten in Japanese *shoujin ryouri*. However, gluten (*ofu*, in Japanese) plays an important role in menu planning, augmenting the many soy products that provide plant-based protein in the *shoujin ryouri* diet. And, the concept of *modoki*—culinary *trompe l’oeil*—is very much a part of Japanese vegetarian cooking and has been for hundreds of years. A cookbook called *One Hundred Bean Curd Delicacies*, first published in 1782, lists several such make-believe preparations: bean curd made to look and taste like clams and fish, even sunny-side up eggs (a carrot in the center suggests the yolk). Indeed, *gan modoki*, literally “remembrance of wild goose,” is a classic example: dumplings made from mashed bean curd and minced vegetables appear to be meatballs made from wild game. This ancient dish remains popular today.

There are some fascinating but random observations made by Chef Oshima that are included in *Yamazato*. I, for one, would like to have known more about his struggle to adapt classical Japanese food to suit local (Dutch) tastes. At one point he notes, “Texture is totally underestimated in the West, but it is taken very much into account in East Asia…the Japanese often speak of *kuchiatari*; feel of the mouth, *shitazawari*; touch of the tongue, *hagotae*; resistance to the tooth, *nodogoshi*; slide through the throat” (p.84). In particular, Oshima remarks that “slimy and slippery qualities are not very highly regarded in the West.…In East Asia, however, the perception…is quite different” (p.85). A bit later, Oshima admits, “I try to balance between creativity and tradition, and after thirty years of experience it hasn’t become any easier” (p.88).
I can appreciate this challenge. Each time I prepare classical Japanese fare for those who have limited experience in eating such food, or travel overseas and prepare a meal with products indigenous to whatever non-Japanese territory I find myself in, I am reminded of the many difficulties inherent in crossing cultures with cuisine. Whether prepared and served by professional chefs or home cooks, in Japan or mukashi no chie (within that established arena, innovation and invention add verve and flair. Viewing this gorgeous photo journal and reading snippets of Chef Oshima’s commentary, I received fleeting glimpses of his creative powers at work. It piqued my curiosity and made me want to sample his food. So, ultimately this book succeeds...as a promotional piece.

—Elizabeth Andoh, A Taste of Culture, Tokyo

The Accidental Connoisseur:
An Irreverent Journey through the Wine World
Lawrence Osborne
New York: North Point Press, 2004
262 pp. $24.00

It’s a bleak fact of life for anyone interested in wine, but it’s the truth. Most wine writing falls into a realm of entertainment somewhere between the maudlin ravings of a teenage would-be nature poet—“wild aromas of lily-stems and loquats pirouette from the glass in a transcendent aromatic ballet”—and the back chapters of a physics textbook—“the Gnadenbeltz soils are chalky marl to a depth of seven meters, below which they’re pure magma.” So it’s a pleasure to have a book like Lawrence Osborne’s The Accidental Connoisseur come along as a tonic for the indigestion this sort of thing can cause.

The Accidental Connoisseur is presented as a wine amateur’s picaresque through the question, what is taste? though, as it turns out, Osborne uses this theme more as a springboard into other issues. Is wine better when its production is small scale and local (yes) or corporate and vast (no)? Is it better when terroir driven (yes) or geographically anonymous (well, no, but is any of this a surprise)? These concerns are also indicators Osborne is not as naïve as either his title or his introduction suggests—the accidental connoisseur has, from early on, a fairly nonaccidental agenda.

This topical diversion, however, hardly detracts from the substantial pleasures to be found as Osborne traipses through the wine regions of Europe and the United States.

His voice is charming, lively, and irreverent; his fluid prose is an effective vehicle for both vivid description and the occasional overarching observation: “Later that night I walked along the beach to the lonely church of Portonovo and at a restaurant nearby I drank a cold green Verdicchio. Wine is 99 percent psychological, a creation of where you are and with whom. I sat in the shadow of the odd mountain and drank my Verdicchio alone, feeling the first snail-like tendrils of my own taste asserting themselves through an unusual chain of associations...” If all wine writing were as shapely, life would be much improved, at least for those of us in the business. Or as funny: “Lounging around the mountainside for a while,” he writes about a visit to the Chianti estate of Podere Pruneto, “I felt like a First World War soldier recovering from a small shrapnel wound in a hospital mysteriously endowed with reservoirs of small-scale organic Chianti.”

Moreover, Osborne has a novelist’s sense of scene and dialogue, and the people he interviews come off nuanced and real, even when—in tried and true documentary fashion—they’re happily skewering themselves with their own words. The deck is stacked, of course. “Robert Mondavi came in as if propelled on wheels, soundless but swift.” A wonderful image, but hard to recover from if you’re the man being described. Much better to be Jean-Pierre Jullien of the tiny Languedoc estate Mas de Cal Demoura, who “lives in a simple house on the winery” and appears with “his voice booming over the roses, ruddy and quickly alert, filled with a physical electricity which brimmed over into his hands, which moved about like a pair of purposeful scissors.” In other words, the fact the deck is stacked doesn’t make the game any less entertaining.

The problem with Osborne’s book, though, isn’t this fairly straightforward bias toward producers of what he terms “terroir wines.” Instead, it’s a parade of small and not-so-small mistakes that starts early on and marches through the text. They range from simple misspellings of well-known wineries (“Marcassia” for Marcassin; “Château Rothschild-Lafite” for Château Lafite-Rothschild) to fairly broad errors. The following paragraph is a case in point:

The most internationally famous producer of the Langhe is Angelo Gaja, whose three hundred dollar bottles of Dolcetta d’Alba adorn the windows of countless gastronomic boutiques from Paris to San Francisco. But Gaja does not make a true Barolo in the technical sense, because he was recently disbarred from the appellation, or aoc, by its vigilant guardians. The dark gossip of the villages is damningly clear: Gaja had tried to mix his nebbiolo with other grape varieties. This is expressly forbidden by the Barolo AOC laws which govern its production. If a wine is...