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 elsewhere, truly fine Japanese food respects the cumulative wisdom of previous generations (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 hily-stems and loquats pirouette from the glass in a transcendent aromatic ballet”—and the back chapters of a physics textbook—“the Gnadenbelzt 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 traipest 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 Demourea, 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
not 100 percent Nebbiolo, say the laws, then it is not a Barolo. The scandal has shaken up the Barolo wine makers. Were they being reactionary or was Gaja a perfidious operator who richly deserved what he got?

This story sounds wonderful but is rife with problems. Some are minor: For instance, dolcetto isn’t a grape, but dolcetto is, and while Gaja makes one, it typically runs only twenty euros a bottle (and isn’t imported to the United States). Also, you can’t be “disbarred” from an AOC in Italy, because the term there is either DOC or DOCG. Some are more substantial: While Gaja is currently the most famous producer of the Langhe, what he’s famous for is Barbaresco; he does make Barolo as well, but Barolo didn’t make his name. The remainder of the paragraph puts an over-the-top rhetorical spin on a fairly complex but ultimately banal situation. Gaja no longer labels his top wines as Barbaresco and Barolo because they typically include a small percentage of the Barbera grape, and as such, and as Osborne accurately points out, they do not fit DOCG regulations. But Gaja’s belief that blending improves his wines has long been a matter of public record, and to that end he led a movement to change the DOCG regulations. When this didn’t succeed, he chose to change the labeling of his wines, but the man himself wasn’t “disbarred” from the DOCG, nor was any of this particularly secret, much less riddled with “dark gossip,” “scandal,” and so on.

Errors like these undermine Osborne’s authority; they make even the casual reader wonder what else might be inaccurate. But for the most part, they’re also solvable problems, the sort of factual slipups that can be fixed easily in the next edition. In the end there’s a surplus of wine writing in the world that imparts information without life, wit, or grace, and those qualities—far more difficult to add later on—are abundant in The Accidental Connoisseur.

—Ray Isle, Food & Wine

Culinary Tourism
Edited by Lucy M. Long
Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004
320 pp. $35.00 (cloth)

The concept of “culinary tourism” refers not only to geographical travel for the purpose of sampling foods of foreign lands but also to any journey outside of one’s normal dietary routine into the realm of the exotic “other.” This volume is a welcome collection of essays centered on this extension of John Urry’s social theory concept of the “tourist gaze.”

In editor Lucy Long’s introduction and orienting theoretical essay, she distinguishes between different types of otherness and strategies for negotiation, as well as categories more specific to food, such as types of food-related activities and the venues in which they take place. The remaining essays in the volume are case studies. Long has wielded her editorial whip lightly. Thus the essays are quite diverse in their approaches and in the extent to which they consider the theoretical implications of the empirical research they describe. This diversity makes it possible to examine the complex possibilities for culinary otherness, something that might be constrained in a more tightly structured volume.

While it is difficult to make sweeping generalizations, the most evident themes involve juxtaposition and hybridity. The book shows how the boundaries between “my cuisine” and “foreign cuisine” are rarely simple or one-dimensional. Instead, they may involve geographic, temporal, cultural, and socioeconomic dimensions that operate simultaneously. Furthermore, these boundaries can be manipulated via assimilation, alienation, and compartmentalization.

For instance, even in something as seemingly simple as geographic tourism there is more than meets the eye. Individuals may become tourists even within a single society by seeking out and learning to distinguish among regional variations in the society’s cuisine. Jeffrey Pilcher describes the rise of “Mexico Profundo,” a search for authenticity that leads Mexicans to explore the varied indigenous roots of their regional cuisines, while Kristin McAndrews notes that the majority of tourists of the poke (marinated, cubed, raw fish) festival on the Big Island of Hawai’i are residents of other Hawaiian Islands. However, while recognition of regional differences would intuitively lead to the fragmentation of culinary identity, the opposite is more often true. As Arjun Appadurai has noted elsewhere, the creation of a national cuisine often begins, somewhat paradoxically, with the recognition of regional differences. It is only through this process that a national cuisine can be organized into an orderly system and partial assimilation can begin to occur.

A frequent juxtaposition in this volume is between the cultural and the temporal. Culinary tourists often express dissatisfaction with the global influences on contemporary ethnic cuisines, and therefore they prefer traditional or pseudotraditional versions that are rarely found today within the originating societies. Jennie Germann Molz’s chapter on Thai restaurants in the West illustrates the way in which the customer’s search for the elusive specter of authenticity has caused restaurants ostentatiously to display putative symbols of historical “Thainess,” such as Buddhist icons and depictions of the royal family, while also serving dishes that...