and post-colonial world-view” (p. 137), demonstrating David was torn between presenting herself as a career woman and as a domestic figure (p. 139). Laurel Forster’s piece, “Liberating the Recipe: A Study of the Relationship between Food and Feminism in the Early 1970s,” also discerns tensions, even among the most radical writers of the women’s liberation movement, between mainstream ideas about food and identity and more experimental attitudes toward women’s relationships to domestic, career, and personal issues.

While I have focused on a few of the essays I found to be the most eye-opening, I certainly don’t mean to discount any of the fine work here. If you’re a recipe reader — and if you’re reading this, I’m betting that you are — you’ll find plenty of insights and substantial exploration within the pages of The Recipe Reader.

—Anne Bower, Ohio State University—Marion

Fork It Over: The Intrepid Adventures of a Professional Eater
Alan Richman
336 pp. $34.95 (cloth) / $24.95 (paper)

Fork It Over is a collection of previously published essays by Alan Richman that appeared between March 1989 and May 2004, mainly in gq. Since they were written primarily for magazines, the shelf life of some of the pieces has expired, though others are still crisp and fresh. Richman ascribes to Trillinesque populism — cheap food is more likely to be good than gourmet food, especially if the latter is cooked by a celebrity chef — but he knows his wine and cheese and is proud of it (he also seems to be proud of the fact that he is fat and Jewish, as he evinces a certain kind of mama’s boy masculinity). Richman’s style is reminiscent of both Calvin Trillin and Jeffrey Steingarten. Sometimes the parallels among the three are so close it’s easy to get confused: which one likes barbecue? Was it Kansas or coastal North Carolina where you get “the best barbecue in the world”? Which one hates Indian desserts and Korean food?

The volume contains laugh-out-loud moments, especially when Richman shares his prejudices about self-righteous vegans, cheap early-birders, and neurotic women who think that butter and meat will kill you. Although stereotypes can be funny, the smarts-to-offense ratio needs to be much higher if an old bromide like “the cheap Jew” is going to get any laughs. But here is a Jewish guy making bad Jewish jokes, so I had to let it go. Richman’s humor works if you share some of his pet peeves, such as celebrity chefs who don’t cook anymore, overrated food by Paul Bocuse, the inherent ugliness of banquets, and pretty boy Todd English’s over-the-top cooking. He gives voice to small prejudices that many of us feel yet are unwilling to acknowledge.

Despite the on-the-mark success of some of his tirades, Richman can deflate his own arguments by overdoing it. For instance, many of us have grown weary of hearing that all foreign foods are wonderful, but can Richman’s contrary assertion that there is not a single good meal in Naples be true? His sharp, comic eye, exposing pretentious sentimentality about exotic locales, fails when it settles on specific people or places (the Jewish mother, Louis Farrakhan, or that restaurant in Shanghai) and devolves instead into stereotype. Thus I grew tired about halfway through the book.

Perhaps we are condemned to read chefs’ maudlin rags to riches tales about food and family (Anthony Bourdain is a notable exception) and clever, insubstantial narratives by food critics. Food appears to be surprisingly trivial in this book. Richman, in fact, has an interest in introspection about food, but his mocking voice too often drowns his meditations.

My innate skepticism may have sabotaged my initial reading. After all, we needn’t be so grim and analytical about food. So I asked two people whose opinions I trust how they regarded Richman’s writing, and both assured me that he was “one of the best.” Prodded by the 100 percent “thumbs-up” rate and the suspicion I had mistaken irony for tomfoolery, I gave Richman another chance, and as I picked up where I had left off, I found myself warming up to him. The chapter on Havana suddenly turned serious and was, in fact, pretty good. The next few essays, such as the one on Moishe’s of Montreal (where the food gets seriously good for the first time) and the one on cranky old Jewish waiters, were also interesting and well written. These essays were among the longest in the book, leading me to conclude the more Richman has to say, the better he gets.

Most of Fork It Over is good gq stuff: food and sex perpetually intertwined. Given anthropologists are always telling us the two loop around each other precisely because both penetrate the surface of our body, Richman’s coupling is certainly defensible and not unexpected. But ultimately the book is an odd mixture of Sharon Stone bending over in a low-cut black crepe Vera Wang cocktail dress asking for more (well…more food) and a neurotic can’t-get-it-up Woody Allen shtick. Its originality resides in the strange intersection of these polarities. In fact, the Sharon Stone chapter, which comes toward the end, is quite good.

Long ago John and Karen Hess noted there are two kinds of food writing in the United States, which reflect two kinds of good food:
In our country, interesting food may be found in two kinds of restaurants: a tiny minority of the expensive, independent ones, and a tiny minority of cheap, ethnic ones catering to communities that have not yet been homogenized. Interesting food writing tends to divide into similar categories: the elegant and the blue-collar. The former requires a large expense account, the latter a tough digestion and a penchant for travel to hard-to-find places.¹

Though Alan Richman ably straddles the two worlds, his heart is clearly in the populist camp.

—Krishnendu Ray, New York University

NOTE

Bookends

Please Feed Me: A Punk Vegan Cookbook
Niall McGuirk
New York: Soft Skull Press, 2004
xvi + 136 pp. Photographs. $15.95 (paper)

I must admit upfront I know absolutely nothing about “punk.” The word brings to mind vague images of young men jumping and screaming into microphones, but nothing more. However, I was a vegan for two long years, so the author of Please Feed Me and I do have something in common. When I picked up the book, I was ready to discover the wonderful world of punk music I’ve been missing this whole time. After all, I reasoned, a good story and a good cookbook must combine to form something greater than the sum of its parts. Unfortunately, I now realize that a mind-numbing story and a useless collection of recipes combine to form something that is simply mind-numbing and useless.

As any thorough reader should, I began with the introduction. My eager anticipation soon turned to boredom. I found myself trudging through a list of events that took place in Dublin, organized by a group called the Hope Collective. There was nothing substantial, just a slew of band names and the order in which they appeared at various venues. Ever hopeful, I became certain the real meat of the book (pun intended) was in the anecdotes that accompanied each recipe. To my dismay, I found that the whole book is simply an expanded list of those same events, with entire paragraphs lifted directly from the introduction.

“Fine,” I said to myself. “A story/cookbook with a bad story still leaves a perfectly good cookbook.” I was able to maintain this attitude long enough to read through the recipes, and some of them looked pretty good. Yet I refuse to tell you which ones they were, on principle, because it would take me at least ten minutes to find them. No, I’m not just a slow reader. There is no index of recipes! So go ahead and buy this book, but I warn you that by the time you find that noodle dish on page 49, the rest of the family may have given up and ordered a cheese-less pizza. If, however, you have the sudden urge to know what band played at the Attic on December 23, 1990, you can flip to the index of gigs in the back and immediately find out (I won’t spoil the surprise).

I have no doubt this book is valuable to the people who organized, played in, or attended the performances of the 285 bands that appear in this book. However, it offers nothing to the rest of the world. I still don’t know what “punk” means, but somehow, I’m just not curious anymore.

—Anna Goldstein, University of North Carolina–Asheville

Cornbread Nation 2: The United States of Barbecue
Edited by Lolis Eric Elie
University of North Carolina Press, in association with the Southern Foodways Alliance, 2004
283 pp. $17.95 (paper)

Cornbread Nation 2, an outgrowth of the 2003 Southern Foodways Symposium, comprises an edited collection of twenty-one pieces on barbecue followed by twenty-two readings on other southern food topics. Considering barbecue from a variety of perspectives, the essays, photos, and poems share the accessibility, easy humor, and passion characteristic of the Southern Foodways Alliance. Contributors include big names in food writing, such as Jessica Harris, Molly O’Neill, Calvin Trillin, and Pat Conroy. While some contributions are original, most are reprints of previously published writing, mainly from the past decade, though one is from an 1896 Harper’s Weekly. Barbecue is the focus of the first half of the book, with subsections on its historical, symbolic and rhetorical, and contemporary uses. The second half of the book is divided into the sections “The People of the South,” “The Places of the South,” and “The Tradition of the South,” ostensibly to lend context to the barbecue material. The book seeks to add thoughtful social commentary to the plethora of popular barbecue books that “often fail to recognize the extent to which any serious study of barbecue must of necessity contain within it a wide range of insights about American history and culture” (p.4).