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 + 156 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 283 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 writings, 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).
Cornbread Nation 2 provides a good start to such considerations. The volume is hampered, however, by such a large number of contributors for its size, which leaves the reader wanting more depth. A few essays problematize the subject of barbecue, such as Robb Walsh’s “Texas Barbecue in Black and White,” which explores barbecue along racial lines, and Stephen Smith’s “The Rhetoric of Barbecue,” an extended analogy between barbecue and religion. Many of the contributions, however, are less thoughtful in their approach, providing, for example, pat, one-page explanations of complex issues like kashruth (p.25). Inconsistent footnotes, redundancies, and the sometimes high-quality but often haphazard collection of essays in the second half of the book further frustrate the reader.

Despite these shortcomings, Cornbread Nation 2 is an entertaining collection. Its diversity of approaches and readability outweigh its flaws. Its very existence—a barbecue collection from a university press—speaks volumes about the establishment of food studies.

—Jonathan Deutsch, Kingsborough Community College, CUNY

Greek Salad: A Dionysian Travelogue
Miles Lambert-Gocs
Williamsburg, va: Ambeli Press; and San Francisco: The Wine Appreciation Guild, 2004
283 pp. $14.95 (paper)

Greece is a country at once widely accessible but also mysterious—an amalgam of East and West, of ancient and modern, with layer upon layer of history often obscured to the sunglass-clad throngs of summer travelers. Despite its often breathtaking beauty, Greece is a country whose charms are not always immediately apparent. As for the Greeks themselves, their most alluring national characteristic is also their Achilles’ heel: their Zorba-the-Greek-like warmth and spontaneity can sometimes seem like complete chaos. When visiting Greece, one just has to learn to enjoy the caprice of unplanned days.

Miles Lambert-Gocs does just that in Greek Salad, his infinitely pleasurable ramble through the Greek islands and mainland. I can think of no better armchair Cicerone. His voyage is a rich one, filled not only with accounts of his peregrinations but with the insights born of a fertile and well-informed mind. As if mirroring the very essence of Greece, Lambert-Gocs moves effortlessly between antiquity and the present, studding his beautifully written narrative with rare depth of knowledge, crisscrossing fluidly over millennia with the stroke of his pen.

Lambert-Gocs became enamored of Greece as a teenager. He returned there to work with the US Department of Agriculture between 1979 and 1983, later wrote about wine for The Athenian, a family-run magazine, and then published his acclaimed first book, The Wines of Greece. For a xenos—a foreigner—he knows the country better than most Greeks do and relays its idiosyncratic charms with appreciation, humor, and deep-rooted knowledge. While the title of his book, Greek Salad, refers to what is arguably the country’s most clichéd export, it also denotes a happy concoction of his own adventures in Greece. It also contains a drop of humor: in Greek “making a salad” of something means making a mess of it.

But there’s no mess here. The book follows the author as he journeys with or without his teenage daughter, almost always in search of local wine. The Greek table is a constant backdrop, but what I enjoyed most about this book are the characters we meet along the way, from Dzordz (“George”), the son of an aunt of an acquaintance of Lambert-Gocs from a wine shop in Astoria, Queens, to Lefty, a disgruntled Athens-born waiter on the Cycladic island of Andros. Lambert-Gocs evokes their “Grenglish” patois with a well-honed ear and imparts fascinating tidbits of information. From Vlach etymologies inherent in the names of northern Greek villages to impressions left upon the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European travelers to Greece to the poetic waxings of ancient scribes regarding Chian wine and women, Lambert-Gocs’s tasty Greek Salad taught me a great deal about the country I have adopted as home.

—Diane Kochilas, Athens