Together at the Table explores alternative food movements within the context of broader social movements. Patricia Allen, at the Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems at the University of California–Santa Cruz, argues that alternative food movements have emerged because of an “increased knowledge of the agrifood system and an increased understanding that the system can be changed” (p.1). To make this argument, Allen focuses on agriculture in California and the United States because of their dominance in the world market.

Allen begins with the assumption that our current agricultural system is not sustainable and that it cannot meet global food security needs. In order to “achieve ecological soundness and social justice” (p.16), the current agrifood system must be altered on three levels: environmental, social, and economic—echoing John Ikerd’s contention that sustainable agriculture must be “environmentally compatible, socially supportive, and commercially competitive.” Allen further contends that these changes take place inside the farm gate and beyond—paralleling Thomas Lyson’s suggestion that we shift from the current industrial agriculture paradigm and adopt a “civic agriculture” that better links farms and communities.2

Chapter two, “Perspectives on Alternative Food Movements,” effectively draws linkages between seemingly disparate social movements based on women’s suffrage, the environment, and alternative food. Allen also establishes that alternative food movements tend to be against capitalism and the disparities that result from the social stratification of wealth and power.

Chapter three explores how those involved in these movements benefit by challenging the status quo. There are practical ramifications of improving the food security and welfare of consumers. By changing their consumption patterns, Allen argues that individuals make a political statement about the status of their food system. In doing so, consumers recognize their power to alter the food system and become more willing to participate in other social movements.

Chapter four examines how alternative agrifood movements are embedded within the existing capitalist system and hence do not challenge that system. This, of course, belies a core pillar of this social movement—anticapitalism. Allen goes on to suggest that political ecology represents a viable framework for examining both the environmental and social aspects of the agrifood system. While this position may be true, Allen does not fully use this framework to explore complex issues like gender and ethnicity that affect every agrifood system, including those in California.

Chapter five explores how alternative agrifood movements may reproduce the same systemic problems they are trying to demolish. Chapter six explains that this result can occur because participants in the alternative agrifood movement come from middle-class backgrounds. This chapter shows how closely aligned privilege and power are to empowerment and social change. As an anthropologist and geographer, respectively, the reviewers found this discussion lacking, as it did not fully explore the historical and geographical specifics of California and how the variables of gendered and ethnic landownership, migrant labor, and environmental assets have allowed the agrifood movements to flourish in this setting.

In chapter seven, Allen addresses the concerns some have about localized food movements. She deftly explores asymmetries of power within and between communities based on differences in access to resources. In chapter eight, “The Politics of Sustainability and Sustenance,” Allen succinctly explains how current agricultural policy is formed and argues that the agrifood movement must work with the environmental movement to change agricultural policy. By joining forces, a stronger coalition can reach more people to “transcend particularities, and arrive at some conception of a universal alternative to that social system which is the source of their difficulties.”

The final chapter, “Working toward Sustainability and Sustenance,” addresses the failure of social movements like the agrifood movement to fully examine the differences between reform and transformation. If the alternative agrifood movement wants to avoid further institutionalization, it must speak to some of the core issues inherent to our agrifood system and devise ways in which to address them successfully.

Scholars, consumers, and activists interested in the alternative food movement will find this book useful. Allen does a fine job of addressing her objective: “to offer information and insights that can contribute to the reflexive efforts of the alternative agrifood movement as it continues to develop” (p.19). Ultimately, Together at the Table enables one to think about the agrifood movement in a more holistic manner, question our individual roles in the food system, and analyze our consumer nature and place in the world.

—Heather McIlvaine-Newsad and Christopher D. Merrett, Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs, Western Illinois University
Gardens of New Spain: How Mediterranean Plants and Foods Changed America
William W. Dunmire
Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004
xvii + 314 pp. Maps, charts, illustrations. $24.95 (paper)

This well-written overview of the Spanish conquest of the American Southwest, as seen through agricultural and plant introductions, reverses what is usually emphasized about the Columbian Exchange: how new-world products such as corn, potatoes, tomatoes, and chocolate transformed Europe. This book focuses instead on how Spanish conquistadores, missionaries, and colonists introduced melons, wheat, stone fruit, and livestock to the natives, in most cases effecting permanent change in the range of commodities produced by local farmers. Thoroughly researched but written for a general audience, the book is enriched by a very useful set of maps and charts that lists the products brought to the New World and their origins and also illustrates their spread throughout the Americas. The book’s text is nicely broken up by a series of photos and pleasing drawings by the author’s wife, as well as brief product vignettes that trace the world history of crops like lettuce, melons, bananas, beans, herbs, and dye plants.

As a reference work and general overview, then, this book is highly recommended. But readers accustomed to a more dynamic view of food and cuisine are likely to be disappointed, for this study is a geographic history rather than a gastronomic one. Although the author includes a few vivid scenes of eating and feasting, his main concern is when and how Mediterranean introductions, reverses what is usually emphasized about the Columbian Exchange: how new-world products such as corn, potatoes, tomatoes, and chocolate transformed Europe. This book focuses instead on how Spanish conquistadores, missionaries, and colonists introduced melons, wheat, stone fruit, and livestock to the natives, in most cases effecting permanent change in the range of commodities produced by local farmers. Thoroughly researched but written for a general audience, the book is enriched by a very useful set of maps and charts that lists the products brought to the New World and their origins and also illustrates their spread throughout the Americas. The book’s text is nicely broken up by a series of photos and pleasing drawings by the author’s wife, as well as brief product vignettes that trace the world history of crops like lettuce, melons, bananas, beans, herbs, and dye plants.

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The book would also benefit from a fuller discussion of the limits of Spanish influence. Natives were not always welcoming of the new foods and styles of farming forced on them. The great Pueblo rebellion of 1680, which expelled Spanish colonists from much of New Mexico for over ten years, was partly spurred by a famine blamed on missionary meddling with agricultural rituals. Also, considering that what Dunmire calls “the big three” of sixteenth-century Spanish cuisine—wheat, olives, and old-world grapes—never became central to southwestern cookery, it is clear that natives adopted Mediterranean foodstuffs on their own terms.

Still, no one can gainsay the transformation to the region’s diet brought by chicken, pork, beef, melons, and stone fruit, not to mention herbs like cilantro and spices like cinnamon. The brutality of Spanish colonialism lies long in the past, and today the Southwest’s indigenous cuisine represents a harmonious mixture of old- and new-world influences. There is nothing wrong with putting a positive spin on what the author correctly describes as “the grandest migration of plants, agriculture, and foodstuff in all of human history.” In fact, given the current obsession of food scholars with promoting the local, it is refreshing to read a book that actually celebrates the transworld blending of diverse food cultures.

—Jeff Charles, California State University–San Marcos

Biting the Hand That Starves You: Inspiring Resistance to Anorexia/Bulimia
Richard Maisel, David Epston, and Ali Borden
New York: W.W. Norton, 2004
xii + 314 pp. $35.00 (cloth)

Anorexia nervosa (AN) is the refusal to maintain body weight at 85 percent of that expected for age and height. Bulimia nervosa (BN) involves episodes of binge eating followed by inappropriate compensatory behavior such as vomiting, misuse of laxatives, and excessive exercise. Both eating disorders, characterized by an intense and obsessive fear of weight gain, have proved challenging to treat through psychosocial interventions. Some studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and interpersonal therapy (IPT) in the treatment of bulimia. CBT has been found to be less successful in treating anorexia, with better outcome rates seen through family-based techniques like the Maudsley Method. Evidence-based research on psychotherapy in the treatment of eating disorders is limited.