Books in Review

In This Issue

The Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America
Andrew F. Smith, Editor in Chief

Oyster
Rebecca Stott

Accounting for Taste: The Triumph of French Cuisine
Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson

The Perfectionist: Life and Death in Haute Cuisine
Rudolph Chelminsky

The People’s Chef: Alexis Soyer, A Life in Seven Courses
Ruth Brandon

The Essence of Style: How the French Invented High Fashion,
Fine Food, Chic Cafes, Style, Sophistication and Glamour
Joan De Jean

The Making of the Modern Kitchen: A Cultural History
June Freeman

French Beans and Food Scares: Culture and Commerce
in an Anxious Age
Susanne Friedberg

Together at the Table: Sustainability and Sustenance
in the American Agrifood System
Patricia Allen

Gardens of New Spain: How Mediterranean Plants
and Foods Changed America
William W. Dunmire

Biting the Hand That Starves You: Inspiring Resistance to
Anorexia/Bulimia
Richard Maisel, David Epston, and Ali Borden

Dinner for Architects: A Collection of Napkin Sketches
Edited by Winfried Nerdinger; Foreword by Philip K. Howard

Consumption and Identity in Asian American Coming-of-Age Novels
Jennifer Ann Ho

Paper or Plastic: Searching for Solutions to an Overpackaged World
Daniel Imhoff

The Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America
Andrew F. Smith, Editor in Chief
New York: Oxford University Press, 2004
Volume 1, xxi + 751 pp. Volume 2, 790 pp. $250.00 (cloth)

This two-volume encyclopedia presents a comprehensive and delightful voyage through historical and contemporary us foodways. Easy to use as a reference work, these two volumes also make fascinating bedside table reading for food aficionados. Entries go from half a page to several pages and cover important people, dishes, events, and trends in the history of us food and drink. At the beginning of volume one is an alphabetical list of articles, beginning with “Adulterations,” “Advertising,” “African American Food,” “Airplane Food,” “Alaska,” “Alcohol and Teetotalism,” and so on. At the end of volume two are several useful appendices, including separate bibliographies for food and drink and lists of food periodicals, Web sites, library collections, museums, organizations, and festivals. Also included is a topical outline of entries such as “Types of food staples” and “Ethnic and cultural cuisines,” as well as a detailed index.

Open a volume at random and enjoy hearing about the origins of the Boston Cooking school, the introduction of bottling, the history of the quintessential American drink—Bourbon—and a brief description of Diamond Jim Brady, the legendary millionaire whose food consumption was as notorious as the lavish diamonds he sported. Each entry is accompanied by a bibliography, some of which are annotated. Contributors include academics, journalists, and independent food scholars, most of whom write in concise and graceful prose. Andrew Smith himself wrote many entries and set a standard for readability upheld by his many contributors. Some long entries are divided into subentries; for example, the fifty-two page “Historical Overview” is divided into ten historical periods including “The Colonial Period” and “World War I.” Vivid illustrations and sidebars accompany some of the entries.
I followed some of my interests into the encyclopedia and first looked up “Mexican American Food,” finding an extremely useful seven-page overview by historian Jeffrey Pilcher with nineteen excellent references. Like many entries, this one was chronologically organized, beginning with the historical origins of Mexican American food in the meeting of Native American and Spanish cuisines, following with the influences of US cuisines after 1848 and finishing with the ongoing intermingling of Mexican and border cuisines through immigration and acculturation. Following my own ethnic roots, I next looked for “Irish American Food” but alas found only “Irish Coffee.” I did, however, find entries for many other US ethnic culinary influences, including African American, Cajun, Creole, Central Asian, Cuban, German, Indian, Italian, Jewish, Native American, Polish, and Scandinavian.

As I was getting ready to write this review, Slow magazine asked me to write a piece on eating competitions, and to my great luck the International Federation of Competitive Eating (IFOCE) held the first ever Shoofly Pie Eating Competition in my home of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. When I returned from the rather gruesome experience of watching eight grim-looking competitors shovel shoofly pie into their mouths in the 95-degree heat and humidity of an east-central Pennsylvania afternoon at the Rockvale Outlet Mall, I turned to the Oxford Encyclopedia to provide some context for my article. I could not find anything in the list of entries or index on “eating competitions or contests,” but I did find some related information under “Cooking Contests” and “Obesity,” and I stumbled upon the aforementioned entry about “Brady, Diamond Jim,” who together with actress Lillian Russell consumed huge meals before an awed public and was perhaps the first harbinger of competitive eating.

The six-page entry on “German American Food” by independent scholar Mark Zanger provided very useful historical background on the development of this cuisine and its Pennsylvania Dutch variations, especially its pork, pies, and pretzels. A sidebar on shoofly pie revealed that the pie is composed largely of brown sugar and molasses and dates to the 1870s. I looked up “Molasses” and found a one-page entry informing me that molasses is the brown syrupy liquid resulting from sugar cane sap after it is boiled and the resultant sugar crystals removed. Molasses reached the American colonies by the 1670s as part of the sea trade between the British Caribbean and New England. By the 1700s rum made from molasses in New England played a key role not only in the triangular Atlantic slave trade but also in European exploitation of Native Americans. That the molasses drenching the bottom of the shoofy pie being shoveled into the mouths of eight eating competitors had such close ties to the rum that played a nefarious role in American history struck me as yet another fascinating way that food intricately winds through every culture.

The Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America will provide fodder for countless explorations and discoveries such as these for food lovers, scholars, students, and writers. With its excellent organization, lucid writing, and comprehensive coverage, it will be an invaluable resource for years to come.

—Carole Counihan, Millersville University

Oyster
Rebecca Stott
London: Reaktion Books, 2004
240 pp. Illustrations. $19.95 (paper)

If oysters beget passion, those who write about oysters beget awe, approval, even admiration. They not only know more about the legendary bivalve than most of mankind but also have referenced the kind of knowledge that has made oyster cuisine and culture a genre in and of itself.

The latest in a culinary/literary genealogy of oyster chroniclers that includes luminaries like Hector Bolitho, M.F.K. Fisher, and Eleanor Clark is Rebecca Stott, professor of