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 shoofly 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
English and drama at the Anglia Polytechnic University in
Cambridge. As the sixth in the Animal series inaugurated
by London publisher Reaktion Books, her well-researched
Oyster dazzles with its breadth of details and observations.
“This book explores the oyster as a material being, its life
history, reproductive modes and evolutionary history, its
long association with sex in the human mind, the set of
relationships it has had with man as food source since pre-
historic times and the development of oyster and pearl
industries around the world, as well as the rich meanings
the oyster has amassed through time and in different cultures,”
(p.11) writes Stott before plunging into nine chapters, an
epilogue, a timeline, a bibliography, recipes, restaurants,
and acknowledgments. Hers is an ambitious undertaking.

Stott is at her best when tracing the evolution of mollusks
from the mid-Paleozoic era about 400 million years ago,
when bivalves (cockles, mussels, and oysters) were particu-
larly plentiful in ancient seas, even though they were sought
as food by marine reptiles. That oysters precede humans by
200 million years attests to their amazing fertility and
adaptability to various aquatic climates. They are virtually
paradigms of survival, and Stott fully explores their “biogra-
phies,” as well as their appeal to primitive man and, since
Roman times, their casting as “the formal food of the banquet,
and informal food of the street” (p.73).

Intriguing also is Stott’s handling of the sociological,
moral, and folkloric roles of the coveted oyster. Oyster fables
warn against small creatures or man’s fingers being caught
between the locked shells of these bivalves, long associated
with gluttony and greed. Homilies wage war against excessive
human consumption; laws were passed to limit oyster
harvesting, and maps were redrawn to reduce occasioned
territorial “wars.” Oysters were even labeled the “emblem-
atic food of the enlightenment with their succulent, light,
taut and white flesh, ‘an expression of the Lebensgefühl of
the fledgling century, its hunger for light, trim and nimble
bodies in stark contrast to the previous century’s floating,
blown-out masses of flesh’” (p.62).

Quoting extensively from the anonymous author of
Lucullus; or, Palatable Essays to Anne Stevenson’s poem
“Oysters,” published in 2000, Stott relies on the tried-and-
true authors of oyster literature, Lewis Carroll, Charles
Dickens, John Philpotts, Hector Bolitho, M.F.K. Fisher,
Eleanor Clark, and David Gordon, to tell her story of the
edible oyster. And to add more contemporary flavor, she
relies on the poetry of Anne Sexton and Seamus Heaney
as well as Anthony Bourdain’s Kitchen Confidential.

Richly illustrated with photos from sources as diverse as
the Zoological Society Library, the Art Institute of Chicago,
London’s National Gallery, the Mariner’s Museum in
Newport News, Virginia, and scores of other collections, the
book greatly benefited from a grant from the British Academy.
But even in this surfeit of visual riches, there are curious
omissions. Though Stott revels in the still-leven of the
Dutch and Flemish artists who in the seventeenth century
turned from painting madonnas and saints to portraying
commonplace interior scenes of men and women eating or
sitting in conversation with tables laden with fruit, wine
decanters, and gleaming pearl white oysters, not even a nod
is given to the French Impressionists who captured the
appeal of Brittany’s oysters in their still-life paintings while
they vacationed along the shore of the Bay of Biscay.

Stott’s Oyster pleases the reader with its wealth of infor-
mation, its prodigious research into the zoological aspects
of the androgynous mollusk, and its sure-handed appraisal
of oyster literature and lore, but unfortunately, it also vexes
with its haphazard skipping from 200 million B.C. to 2003
as it sweeps everything into the path of oyster culture. And
Stott is on particularly shifting ground when she lists oyster
bars and restaurants around the globe and includes a sam-
ping of oyster recipes “from different periods of history and
from round the world” (p.223). To include a greatly altered
version of the traditional recipe for Oysters Kirkpatrick,
named after the manager of San Francisco’s Palace Hotel
from 1894 to 1914, and to omit the historic Hangtown Fry and
La Mediatrice in a collection of only eight recipes is simply
another example of Stott’s scattershot approach. If it were
only an isolated example, it would be a quibble, but it illus-
trates a serious flaw in an otherwise commendable study.

—Joan Reardon, author, Oysters: A Culinary Celebration

Accounting for Taste: The Triumph of French Cuisine
Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004
258 pp. Illustrations. $25.00 (cloth)

If only Benjamin Franklin had known the pleasures to be
found in a good French bistro, perhaps today Americans
would be known for culinary achievement as opposed to an
asocial, fast-food culture seemingly indifferent to taste. But
that was, alas, not the story. As Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson
explains in her far-ranging work Accounting for Taste: The
Triumph of French Cuisine, Franklin was the founding
father of a national food model that called for the moral
rejection of the pleasures of the table. Indeed, the icon of
American pragmatism, the model of an American-style