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 particularly 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 “biographies,” 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 tables 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 “emblematic 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 *Lacullus*; 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 information, 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 sampling 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 illustrates 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
savour-vivre, boasted of culinary indifference. He exhorted his “countrymen to abjure the pleasures of the table and set their minds on higher things” (p.170). Thoughts should be turned to service to the nation, not the pleasures of the palate. Could this account for why Americans wandered in the culinary desert for almost two centuries? Could it account for the enormous gulf between French and American culinary practice that existed up until the early 1990s? Today there is an adulation of celebrity chefs, a taste for culinary adventure, and a reconfiguration of urban space to accommodate a “restaurant world” that appears to have taken Americans far from Franklin’s dinner table. Yet, as Ferguson notes, very real differences in culinary traditions and practices remain deeply entrenched. “Just like nationalism generally,” Ferguson argues, “culinary nationalism continues to flourish in the twenty-first century” (p.172). Franklin would no doubt be pleased.

How do we account for this gulf that separates not only the United States from France but, as Ferguson argues, France from the rest of the world? How do we account for the global “triumph of French cuisine”? Ferguson returns to some of the classic texts—cookbooks, menus, gastronomic treatises, and literature—to reexamine the links between cuisine, nation-state, and excellence. What she discovers is that France, not surprisingly, had its culinary founding fathers too. There is the relatively obscure chef Marie-Antoine Carême, whom Ferguson credits with the professionalization and rationalization of cooking practice, as well as the better-known gastronomes Grimond de la Reynière and Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin. As Ferguson skilfully outlines, these culinary founders set the French on a course that made the pleasures of the table a national patrimony. Whereas Franklin scoffed at culinary indulgence in his writing, Reynière and Brillat-Savarin articulated codes of practice that shaped a “culinary conscience” for the growing middle class of the new democratic France that emerged after years of revolution, terror, and Napoleonic adventures. While the ancien régime coupled “cuisine and class,” the nineteenth-century nation-state would tie cuisine to country, translating “largely class-oriented culinary practices into a national code” (p.7). From Brillat-Savarin to Paul Bocuse, there emerged a shared notion that every French citizen should enjoy, as a birthright, delicious food. It was through language and gastronomic literature that these culinary founders transmitted this birthright and through daily practice (and a good béchamel sauce) that the French citizen of the nineteenth century exercised it. This emphasis on the bond between cuisine and country, according to Ferguson, was of particular importance to a nation with strong regional identifications that could work against the unity of the modern nation-state. As France urbanized and industrialized over the course of the nineteenth century, a new generation of writers, such as Marcel Proust, Alphonse Daudet, and Marcel Rouff, fashioned a place for regional cuisines and local foodways within the collective memory of the French. These writers focused on a “belief in an intimate bond between foods and the land, one that bound consumers and producers together in an organic whole” (p.115). Such links were reinforced by the government of the Third Republic (and continue today) with the promotion of culinary republicanism through domestic economy courses and a sustained investment in the promotion of quality food production. “A national discourse not only accepted but actively promoted regional difference,” Ferguson notes, “but on the assumption that all were subsumed in a greater whole” (p.129). France was conceived as a unified gastronomic entity dedicated to an ideal of incorporating “culinary excellence into everyday life” (p.176). The French culinary contract became a way to both express and create community. Ferguson tells a compelling tale of culinary identity. Yet I wonder how much of that identity is based on a story that the French tell themselves and how much of it is based on the story that outsiders such as Ferguson construct. Ferguson notes that “national identity is invariably constructed from without as well as from within” (p.5). The construction from without is highlighted when Ferguson draws on interviews with French chefs in New York and explores the 1987 film Babette’s Feast—based on a 1952 tale by a Danish woman and presented by Danish film director Gabriel Axel. These interpretations “from without” have played a critical role in the complicated reproduction of French culinary identity. But how do they influence the French sense of their own culinary patrimony? What is the result of this reproduction that reflects back to France not only an image of “an idealized country that lives through its cuisine” (p.201) but also the assumption that this cuisine is superior?

This sense of culinary superiority, it might be helpful to remember, came from the same nineteenth-century impulse that sought to classify peoples and civilizations. As with most such systems of classifications in France, the supremacy of French civilization was taken for granted. In the France where fictional Babette never lived, this same sense of superiority and idyllic culinary identity has been and continues to be used to create a gastronomic “us” and “them” that serves to exclude, for example, North African immigrants. This, too, is an important consideration in the story of the “triumph of French cuisine” that remains to be fully explored.

—Kolleen M. Guy, University of Texas at San Antonio