this richly illustrated book, he demonstrates that artists of
the sixteenth century produced inventive food subjects,
but it was Dutch painting of the seventeenth century that
provided the basis for all subsequent food images; in fact,
these artists developed a visual vocabulary that is still used
by painters today. As Bendiner explains in his introduction,
“Food images echo and revise their predecessors, incorpo-
rating the character of their different societies, but they are
never quite divorced from their own particular history as
depictions of food” (p.8).

This book follows the pattern of many recent thematic
museum installations in which the emphasis is on ideas,
sometimes unconscious, that underlie a certain theme.
Within the chapters, which collectively chart the passage
of food from the market to the dinner table and beyond,
paintings are discussed in loose chronological order, often
breaking out of the linear pattern in order to amplify a
point and draw larger connections. This is not a traditional
art historical study; rather, Bendiner’s approach represents
what many students and museumgoers seem to crave today:
creative connections and nonlinear thinking, more in
tune with the relatively new field of visual culture in which
chronology is sublimated to ideas.

As someone who delights in the colors, textures, and
smells of open air and covered markets, I was especially
enticed by the title of Bendiner’s first chapter, “The Market.”
It is representative of the author’s approach to each chapter
in that his discussion incorporates such seemingly strange
bedfellows as Pieter Aertsen, French eighteenth-century artist
Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, American early twentieth-
century painter and printmaker John Sloan, and British
postmodern painter and sculptor Damien Hirst. As Bendiner
takes the reader on a wild ride through seventeenth-century
Holland to twentieth-century Britain, he demonstrates the
ways in which images resonate with one another formally
and theoretically, in the process constructing a picture of
food painting that is both fluid and dynamic. For example,
he discusses American painter Wayne Thiebaud’s early
1960s “gooey and machine-made desserts, repetitiously
aligned and un-individualized in a store display” in terms
of Aertsen’s pictures of “satisfaction, delighted, appreciated
nourishment,” at the same time connecting Warhol’s soup
cans to Aertsen’s depictions of abundance, suggesting that
the soup can, no matter how mechanized, “stretches on
infinitely, a vision of copiousness…” (p.53). Such general-
ized but compelling connections work well in the context
of a study that draws on the anthropological views of Claude
Lévi-Strauss and the concept of “fetishism” as conceived
by Marx and Freud.

A theme running throughout the book that makes it so
refreshing and pleasurable to read is Bendiner’s focus on the
seduction of food images. He makes the importance of this
aspect of his project clear from the start. In his introduction
he recalls standing in a ticket line to enter Amsterdam’s
Rijksmuseum behind a corpulent visitor and later finding
the fellow in the galleries rapturously scrutinizing seventh-
century food paintings. While many students of art history
have been taught about the moralizing aspect of seventh-
century food paintings, much less has been written about
the enjoyment that such images incite. As the author
argues, his book presents an “open-minded approach” (p.9).
This open-mindedness leads to an intriguing and provocative
study. Reading Bendiner’s book leaves one with the general
tools to consider images of food in Western art from the
Renaissance to the present in relation to one another,
resulting in a rewarding game for the reader/viewer and a
refreshing contribution to the field of art history.

—Dorothy Moss, University of Delaware

The Mycenaean Feast
Edited by James C. Wright
Princeton, NJ: The American School of Classical Studies
at Athens, 2004
xi + 217 pp. Illustrations. $25.00 (paper)

Archaeologists have long considered feasting an important
area of research, although their presence at contemporary
feasts is not always for purely scientific purposes (see,
for example, Dietler and Hayden’s notable Feasts:
Archaeological and Ethnographic Perspectives on Food,
Politics and Power, 2001). The Mycenaean Feast is based
on a session organized by James Wright at the annual
meetings of the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA).
Both the AIA session and this volume highlight the formidable
assortment of disciplines that archaeologists can bring
to their research. The study of the Mycenaean civilization,
named for the site of the fortified city of Mycenae, has long
been the subject of much attention in field and laboratory.
This clearly written and carefully researched collection
of eight chapters by various authors begins with James
Wright’s introduction, followed by his overview of feasting
in the Mycenaean society. Wright interestingly points out
that we lack a broadly accepted definition of the word
“feast” and provides his own definition as the “formal
ceremony of communal eating and drinking to celebrate
significant occasions” (p.15).
He identifies nine distinct benefits of feasting, including mobilizing labor, creating cooperative alliances, and compensating for transgressions (p.9). All demonstrate not only how feasting was important in past societies but how the same benefits can be applied to the present. Memories of feasts, or of our present-day “power lunches,” wedding banquets, bachelor parties, and Thanksgiving gatherings, all resonate with this research. Control and influence, specialized vessels and containers, and lists of supplies remain pertinent to today’s feasts.

Chapter three, “Animal Sacrifice, Archives and Feasting at the Palace of Nestor,” coauthored by Sharon R. Stocker and Jack L. Davis, looks at the archaeological evidence for a feast that took place shortly before the palace was destroyed. Archaeologists have identified the remains of at least ten head of cattle that were sacrificed. Linear B tablets indicate the presence of a king, a group of the elite, and a military commander, along with special banquet tables and chairs to seat twenty-two (p.71). The archaeological evidence reveals that this feast involved sacrificial offerings, then a banquet for selected dignitaries, followed by the distribution of surplus meat. The quantity of surplus meat is based on the number of cattle slaughtered and would have been sufficient for an estimated one thousand families (p.72).

Thomas G. Palaima’s “Sacrificial Feasting in the Linear B Documents” (chapter five) relies on recent developments in our understanding of this ancient language, which remained a mystery for many years. A form of early Greek, it recorded symbolic representations and symbol combinations on tablets and seals and seems to have been used largely for party planning. The syllabic signs and ideograms record who was contributing what to the feast, who was on the A-list because of their “donation,” and critical details such as how many chairs, tables, and so on were available for the guests. Also, just as we might keep track of donations for the IRS, a thorough accounting was kept of gifts to the gods. Some of the gods and gifts are familiar, like grain and olives to Persephone; others, like pe-re-“82-jo, are less well known (p.99).

We have estimates that the ancient Athenians devoted at least one-third of the year to festivals and feasting, an enviable schedule. There is even a reference to an “o-pi-te-<u->ke-e-u,” a person in charge of the cooking and feasting equipment (p.104). These tablets also document the use of heirloom tools and equipment. The bulls and rams to be sacrificed wore a particular bridle and were stunned with a special axe; the portions of the carcass to be sacrificed were then removed with a ceremonial knife. Frescos at Pylos show unique table seating arrangements. The Ta inventory lists eleven tables, six thrones, and sixteen stools. Tablet Ta 714.1-2 describes one throne as “primarily rock crystal, inlaid with blue-glass paste, emerald color paste and gold and having a back support inlaid with gold figures of men and date palm trees” (p.113). Whether you got a throne or a stool was determined by your rank, but just being invited to the feast put you on the A-list. The translated texts of the tablets are listed in the appendix. I was particularly fascinated by the reference to two deities, the “Lady of the Tresses” and the “Cattle-ish Lady” (p.121).

Chapter seven, “A Goodly Feast…A Cup of Mellow Wine: Feasting in Bronze Age Cyprus,” by Louise Steel, contains an interesting discussion of the diacritical feast that provided exclusivity of membership, foods, and custom as a reinforcement of status. The normal Cypriot diet at this time was largely cereals, in contrast to the feast menu, which evidence indicates consisted largely of meat. Substantial quantities of wine were served in kraters, the equivalent of crystal stemware (p.172).

Susan Sherratt’s contribution, “Feasting in the Homeric Epic,” is last but not least in this wonderful volume. The heroes of the Iliad and the Odyssey spend a great deal of time feasting, in addition to fighting and wandering. The style of their feasts varies from a kind of potluck supper to picnics of sorts and special banquets, but all prominently feature meat, wine, and bread or cereals (p.184). Then, as now, special dinners featured some sort of entertainment, generally speeches but also singing. Homeric epics seem to use these feasts as the moment to begin or end some thrilling adventure. Also, it is clear that social rules are being defined, and an equal place at the table translates into membership in the “club” and a share of the bounty.

I wrote this review as the Greek government, in its ongoing efforts to recover antiquities illicitly obtained and illegally removed from Greece, was bringing legal action against the Getty Museum and others. Numerous countries have attempted to reclaim their past heritage through legal actions over the years, but most of these efforts have been unsuccessful. As early as 1832, the Greek government passed legislation to try to halt the loss of the country’s patrimony. These events are relevant to this review, as The Mycenaean Feast dramatically showcases the importance and complexity of information that can be provided by artifacts that remain linked to their archaeological setting and context. Although looted materials retain their great beauty and can still potentially yield some data, once disconnected from the site, the soil, and the accompanying context, they offer only a shadow of what could be learned. This loss of knowledge for science and patrimony cannot be overemphasized, as we learn little from a fragmented and fractured past. This book
is a wonderful study for anyone interested in feasting, but it also stands as a testament to how deeply we can be enriched by careful research. I recommend The Mycenean Feast to all who have wondered why there are such strong feelings about the illicit trafficking in antiquities.

—Daphne Derven, Stone Barns Center for Agriculture

Presenting the Turkey: The Fabulous Story of a Flamboyant and Flavourful Bird
Sabine Eiche
Florence: Centro Di, 2004
127 pp. Illustrations. $42.50 (cloth)

In this delightful book art historian Sabine Eiche traces the fascinating history of the turkey, which originated in North America. This unusual bird is closely related to Asian pheasants, and zoologists have proposed that these two species evolved from a common ancestor, although no intermediate fossils have been found in Asia or North America. When humans first arrived in North America 15,000 years ago, turkeys inhabited a vast expanse of the continent, from present-day Ontario in the north to southern Mexico. A nonmigrating land bird, turkeys were easily captured and provided an important food source, particularly during winter when other foods, such as many fruits, vegetables, and migratory birds, were unavailable.

In pre-Columbian times the turkey was the only food animal domesticated in North America, and the domesticated bird was an important source of protein in pre-Columbian Mexico. Spanish explorers and Conquistadors first encountered turkeys in Mexico. The Spanish surmised that the turkey was a type of peacock, but they found it better tasting and easier to raise. Domesticated turkeys were introduced into the Caribbean and Spain shortly after the initial encounter. Unlike virtually every other new-world food, turkey was immediately adopted into European cuisines. This singular acceptance may have arisen from the mistaken association of the turkey with the peacock—an iconic food of the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance.

At first turkeys were mainly eaten by Europe’s aristocracy, but by the end of the sixteenth century, they were both common in Europe and cheaper than other poultry, including chickens. When English settlers arrived in eastern North America in the early seventeenth century, they were already familiar with turkeys, which by the early seventeenth century had become common on English tables. Both wild and domesticated turkeys (the latter imported from Europe) were an important food for early colonists. Over the next three hundred years, the turkey took on mythic dimensions in American popular culture, and it remains an important symbol, particularly at Thanksgiving.

Three problems confront anyone writing about the history of the turkey. The first is the plethora of myths and “fakelore” surrounding the bird. The second is the daunting quantity of information available about the turkey: tens of thousands of references, descriptions, and depictions of the turkey in American and European literature, newspapers, diaries, letters, legal documents, paintings, engravings, poems, zoological works, and cookbooks. It is impossible for any one individual to examine each of these. The third problem is that a massive work on the subject already exists: Arlie William Shorger’s The Wild Turkey: Its History and Domestication, published in 1966, a wonderful reference work with thousands of citations from historical sources, particularly American. It would be difficult for anyone else to address this vast subject without ending up as simply a footnote to Shorger.

Eiche has successfully navigated these potential pitfalls. She carefully avoids repetition of turkey myths so common in the culinary literature and concentrates on the turkey’s introduction and influence in Europe, tracing its advent through art—drawings, paintings, sculpture, tapestries, maps, and, more recently, cartoons. Shorger mainly focused on the wild turkey in America and did not deal in depth with the turkey in artistic works, so Eiche’s contribution fills crucial gaps. Of particular importance are the references to the turkey in Italy as early as 1521, which clearly demonstrate the early introduction and adoption of this American food into Europe. Eiche also includes a wonderful chapter on turkey language that includes explanations for how the turkey acquired its name and how this bird has enriched our language with colloquialisms. She tells the turkey’s story in an engaging way and includes sixty-five unusual illustrations, many of which have not been previously published. Eiche ends her book with an anthology of literary references, along with some examples of turkey-themed poetry.

All in all, this is a delightful book, highly recommended for those interested in the history of America’s unofficial national bird, in how new-world foods were adopted in Europe, and in depictions of food in art.

—Andrew F. Smith, editor in chief, Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America