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 published before. 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