The pursuit of Native American foodways has been hampered by roadblocks. There is relatively little recorded description from pre-reservation times, and orally transmitted material has shifted with changing cultures. By the late 1800s the First Peoples' food heritage (usually the last cultural artifact to disappear through acculturation) was, in fact, disappearing. Practitioners of then-new anthropology undertook scientific observations, comparing what they saw with earlier European or Euro-American notations. And Native Americans themselves recorded recent traditions. Moreover, the first studies of Indian life tended to focus on one craft at a time—basketry or pottery, for example—and indigenous regional cuisines were no exception. Some were limited cookbooks of local communities; others compiled extensive data, as has Daniel E. Moerman's monumental Native American Ethnobotany (1998). Frank Cushing's Zuni Breadstuff (1925) was a rare effort to integrate such foods into the broader culture.

It is therefore with great joy that we welcome Linda Murray Berzok's American Indian Food, first in the series Food in American History, texts designed to complement high-school-level social studies programs. To my knowledge, it is the first attempt at a nationwide view of the subject, and for that it deserves our praise. Its long introduction interrelates geographical (regional) and cultural factors (history included) and their roles in driving tribal cuisine developments. The details of indigenous foodways are broken down into chapters entitled “Foodstuffs,” “Food Preparations, Preservation and Storage,” “Food Customs,” “Food and Religion,” and “Concepts of Diet and Nutrition.” These chapters document such cultural connections as the little-known early southwestern introduction of Spanish aboveground clay ovens called hornos and the advent of more complex European-style baking. In the end we have a much-needed group portrait of different regions, a good deal of data, and a challenge to the stereotypes that have created simplistic distortions of Native ways.

A valuable first step, it is nevertheless occasionally flawed. Berzok's perspective sees separate cultures: “Six Regions, Six Foodways...as different as France and Italy” (p.4). I take issue with such unsubstantiated generalities and would actually have preferred speculation on a unifying, overarching culture in which regional cultures were really subcultures. This is more useful in an analysis of lethal misunderstandings between indigenous people and Euro-Americans in such matters as farming, gathering, and hunting. A matter of conflicting worldviews, Indian spiritual beliefs of nonownership and respect for all forms—possible in a boundless land with comparatively small population densities—vied with European self-interest and a history of dense population and limited land.

Sound and flawed material are sometimes indistinguishable. For example, the chapter on foodstuffs offers a laudable amount of fine material, occasionally weakened by contradictions or omissions. Plant and animal sources are organized well: meat and fish sources are tied to their geography—northwestern salmon, for example. Regional discussions include standard cooking and preserving methods, a fair amount of legend (as in the case of maize), and the observations of early Anglo-Americans such as John Heckewelder, who lived among the Mohicans of New York and the Delawares of Delaware (1817). Plant foods are varied and well categorized by agricultural processes (among them the famous and symbiotic Three Sisters, corn, beans, and squash or pumpkins) and gathered wild plants. Most important, Berzok includes lesser-known foodstuffs such as groundnuts, once a staple legume in most sections of the country, and camas roots, still a staple in the Northwest. She does not always indicate where, however, the plants grew and, therefore, who ate them, somewhat at odds with her “six cuisines” principle. And it would have been good to distinguish which wild greens were European transplants (dandelion, which she mistakenly claims to be an early foraged plant) and which were indigenous (Monarda, or bee balm).

Berzok has taken pains to present her material through the eyes of Native Americans. She cites the testimony of elders, calls Euro-Americans “invaders” (not “settlers,” p.15), and prefers the reversal “gathering-hunting” to emphasize Indian women's essential roles. Yet she is sometimes guilty of twenty-first-century bias. She notes that certain food was eaten “putrefied,” that is, gone bad, but consumed because it “was all there was to eat” (p.115), not considering that these fermented or aged foods were prepared diligently and relished for their flavors, much as we prize aged, odorous cheeses. It is hard to conceive of Berzok's description of early Native American hunts in which bison (sacred to the Sioux) was butchered by the hundreds and half of the meat was “left to rot” (p.9). This sounds far more like the practice of Europeans, who sought hides and tongues for profit, than of Native Americans, who revered life. Likewise, she is repelled by the Indian practice of cooking meat as whole, uncleaned, and undressed animals, entrails and all, although hearth experience shows that the skin peels away (along
with feathers, charring, and dirt); the inwards shrink and solidify, simplifying their removal; and the flesh retains more flavor, essential fats, and meat juices.

Perhaps, such problems are typical of ground-breaking attempts and secondary material. Some may have been avoided with a search for broader generalizations, more time, or field experience with fire, pots, ingredients, recipes, and tasting. Such a project may be years in the making. Meanwhile, we have a decent indexed and footnoted reference.

—Alice Ross, Ph.D., author, A Taste of Brookhaven

Farming for Us All: Practical Agriculture and the Cultivation of Sustainability
Edited by Michael Mayerfeld Bell
University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004
299 pp. Photographs. $22.50 (paper)

In the modestly burgeoning literature on sustainable agriculture, which over the past two decades has been established as a serious subject and subdiscipline both within and outside of the academy, the face of the farmer and the actual work of farming have remained perplexingly obscured. With very few exceptions discourses about sustainability are strangely ungrounded and tend to overlook the particular people, places, and everyday practices that constitute the agricultural landscape, which is rarely fully rendered. The details of farming as a job and a way of life, the skills and special knowledge, the daily challenges and difficulties, the worries and pressures, as well as the specific joys and beauties, are things that, for the most part, are almost completely unknown to the vast majority of people, who are now separated from the land. Farming for Us All goes a long way toward redressing these deficiencies.

Through an accessible narrative that combines a colloquial, sympathetic, yet sophisticated discussion of the broad concerns and controversies facing the sustainable agriculture movement with finely detailed research based on in-depth interviews and long-term participatory observation, Michael Bell and his collaborators introduce the reader to the Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI), a grassroots sustainable agriculture organization founded and run by working farmers. At the heart of this book are the stories of farmers themselves, told in their own words in conversations with the authors in the context of gatherings both large and small held in fields, barns, or machine sheds, or around kitchen tables or at cafés. The book makes the lives of farmers palpable and puts pressing concerns for their very survival at the center of what, as mentioned above, can often be an impersonal and abstract debate.

As a group, the PFI no longer wish to be merely ciphers of the industrial model of agriculture that has come to dominate and done so much damage to farmers and farmland and rural communities. They have come together to seek change, to challenge the orthodoxy of modern factory farming, which is, essentially, get big or get out. The issue is, of course, much more complicated, and the book does an excellent job of explaining the details of agricultural history, political economy, and sociology without overshadowing the farmer’s perspective at its core. It contains a great deal of thoughtful reflection on the relational nature of farming and is especially attentive to gender relations in agriculture and the realities of family life. This latter focus is very welcome, as women in agriculture tend to remain invisible and underrepresented, though they more often than not play an integral role. We hear directly from many women in this book who are either farmer’s wives or partners or farmers and independent operators in their own right. Dialogue between researchers and farmers, among farmers themselves, and within farm families gives the reader new insight into the everyday challenges of trying to make a living by farming.

It is this dialogue that becomes a model for what Bell is advocating: a new kind of conversation about sustainability that can break out of the usual top-down monologues of conventional agriculture and take into account the differences and the multiple perspectives and voices of ordinary farmers. Such a dialogical and practical agriculture, Bell argues, would take us a long way towards a sustainable model. Explicating the philosophical underpinnings of this approach—for example, the pragmatism of James, Dewey, and Mead combined with the dialogism of Bakhtin—Bell is able to show us a new way of thinking about and engaging with the predicaments of contemporary agriculture.

Given the sensitive and nuanced discussion that characterizes this book, one must take exception to Bell’s surprisingly nonchalant dismissal of the organic farming movement, which has been and remains—despite the present crisis of corruption and cooptation (epitomized by the debacle of federal regulation)—at the vanguard of sustainable agriculture in this country and abroad. It is worth remembering that the use of the term “sustainable” in relation to agriculture was first proposed as a relatively neutral, more generic replacement for the rather more ideologically laden term “organic” in order to avoid the radical political implications sometimes associated with the latter. In any case, repeating, uncritically and out of context, the pronouncements of others does a great disservice to