an extraordinarily dedicated, skillful, and now beleaguered population of small-scale, philosophically committed organic farmers who continue to strive for good stewardship of the land, high-quality product, and the ability to make a decent living from their labors. The ideal of organic farming, in its original form as a socioecological project, was always to benefit both people and nature and to foster a better relationship between them. Organic farmers, after all, were the ones who actually started the dialogue that Bell now advocates and valorizes, and there is a great deal of overlap between the sustainable and organic movements. So-called sustainable or organic farmers, when it comes to the fundamentals of good farming, are not very different at all.

But putting this criticism, which I do not make lightly, aside, Farming For Us All is an important book, full of living voices and ideas that we all can learn from. Sustainable agriculture remains an open question without a single answer. It requires much more of the kind of candid and often difficult dialogue that is represented in these pages.

—Timothy Vos, University of California–Santa Cruz

The Botanist and the Vintner: How Wine Was Saved for the World
Christy Campbell
Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2005
360 pp. $24.95 (cloth)

If you’re not a wine geek, you may not know that the European wine industry was nearly wiped out by an infestation of a small aphid called phylloxera. Those of you who do know the story have probably heard only the short version: phylloxera nearly destroyed Europe’s vineyards until it was discovered that American vine stock—a different strain of vine than the European—was impervious to the aphid. Grafting European vines (Vitis vinifera) onto American rootstock saved everything.

Christy Campbell, however, demonstrates with great flair that the challenges phylloxera imposed on late nineteenth-century France were far deeper than simply keeping vines alive. In The Botanist and The Vintner: How Wine Was Saved for the World, the tale of the struggle to control the pest is also an account of the coming of age of the scientific community in France; of culture wars not only across oceans but across town lines; of economic struggles that split regions apart. It’s also a story filled with lively characters, some of whom are marked by their eccentricity, others by their brilliance.

The story starts out innocently enough: An American vine grower sends a friend in France some grapevines to add to his collection. As Campbell points out, plant collecting of all sorts had become a popular pastime, especially once steam-powered cargo ships made the trip across the Atlantic fast enough to get specimens over to Europe alive and the newly laid train tracks connecting European towns made it even easier to share them among friends. There was also the nifty new Wardian Case, a terrarium named for its designer that sealed plants (and whatever lived on them) in glass, allowing for even easier transportation.

In 1863, a year after the French vine grower planted the American vine, vineyards a few kilometers to the south fell ill. The disease got progressively worse, killing the vines and spreading to others. Not knowing what to make of the malady, the locals tried whatever they could think of: sulfur, tar, gasoline, religion, anything. Nothing, however, was effective. The disease soldiered on.

That, in itself, is a great beginning for a juicy horror story. But only now do things begin to get really interesting. As Campbell points out, at this point in France seven out of ten Frenchman were involved in agriculture; the country was obsessed with botany in general and took enormous pride in its vineyards. The French vintners were also enjoying a period of great prosperity: sales were up, as were prices, in part pushed along by both the invention of glue for labels (heightening the importance of name) and by what has become known as 1855 Classification, a classification of Bordeaux’s vineyards based on the prices they were fetching that year. (The classification, which still stands in nearly unchanged form, still exerts a great amount of power on the perception of quality of Bordeaux’s estates.) As far as the French were concerned, the only wine needed—or even worthy of serious consideration—was French.

At the same time Darwin was shocking the masses with his theories of evolutionary adaptation, and Pasteur proposed his “germ theory,” that every living being, no matter how small, had to be produced by another. Meanwhile, industrialists were developing machines and chemicals, things that would give man more power over his environment.

Campbell recounts how the clash of science, tradition, and industry resulted in mass confusion: while priests weaved through vineyards trailing wisps of incense, the botanists were championing the grafting of French vines onto American rootstocks, since the American plants had developed an immunity to the bug during all their years of living together. Meanwhile, the chemical companies were pushing their wares, for which industrial-minded vintners and the anti-americanistes were ponying up massive amounts of money.
Hucksters had a field day with everyone, selling treatments as bizarre as dried human urine (which they sold for much more money than the cost of collection). Rifts opened up along societal lines: the rich could afford to protect their pride in French vines for far longer than poorer vintners, who were more likely to plant American vines or flee to unphylloxerated parts of the world.

In every line of the book, Campbell captures the urgency of the situation and the widespread frustration of the world’s inability to stop phylloxera. He draws deeply on a wide variety of texts that help to give the story both its credibility and its sense of suspense as people get closer to answers (or further away, which seems to be just as common an occurrence). Notes from early scientific journals give a clear feel of an industry at once charged and excited by the challenge of the bug and frustrated by infighting and inflated egos. Quotes pulled from personal correspondence illuminate flashes of brilliance we can only wish had been heard earlier—in the 1870s, for instance, when Isador Bush, an American farmer with some phylloxera-infected vines he had imported from Austria, declared with certainty that they were “the principal reason why the culture of European vines has been an absolute failure in our country.” Campbell also pulls out such pithy documents as a Burgundian report that deemed phylloxera “just punishment” for the vine growers of southern France, who Burgundians considered greedy for their large yields. By that way of thinking, it was just punishment for such a statement that the insect started munching its way through Burgundy soon after.

Like a great mystery writer, Campbell builds the story up to a point of resolution: vintners around the world graft their vinifera vines onto American rootstock safe from phylloxera and continue once again putting out tasty wines. But he also leaves the reader on an uneasy note, describing how quickly we can forget what we’ve learned when it’s convenient, as we did after Prohibition. Vintners, of course, were eager to get up and running again, so they planted vines on AX1 rootstock—a hybrid known to be somewhat susceptible to phylloxera but given to higher yields than the one popular before Prohibition. In the 1990s the first breakouts of phylloxera in California were greeted with shock, anger, and—it being the 1990s instead of the 1890s—lawsuits instead of marches. Exploration of chemical means to control the pest was paired with incredulity that there wasn’t yet any such means. Furadan was used until too many birds died, Campbell reports. Scientists responded with an interest in genetically modifying the grapevines.

Campbell describes the wine world as dividing between terroirists—those who believe in the importance of wine having a flavor particular to the place it’s grown, which they fear may be altered or obliterated by genetically modified vines—and the genetic scientists. The wine world remains divided to this day. Regardless of one’s feeling on GMOS, it’s hard not to admit that the scene feels awfully similar to the one that played out in late nineteenth-century France. But, as Campbell writes, that we have wine to drink today is reason enough to raise a glass to the botanists and the vintners who saved it for the world.

—Tara Q. Thomas, Wine & Spirits

The Spirits of America: A Social History of Alcohol
Eric Burns
352 pp. $34.95 (cloth)

Most if not all societies partake of substances that provoke derangement, indulging in everything from the Aztec hallucinogen known as ololiuhqui to the measured concoction of gin and vermouth known as a martini. Yet most if not all societies also have complex relationships with their chosen substances, damning and accepting them in equal measure. (And consequently most societies also, in one way or another, attempt to regulate the use of those substances.) Eric Burn’s The Spirits of America provides a lively jaunt through the United States’ lengthy and dysfunctional relationship with its favored medium of mild derangement, alcohol.

Burns, a broadcast journalist for Fox News and, as he puts it, “not, by training, a historian” (p. 301), works in a more anecdotal than academic mode. His prose is breezy and energetic, and he comes across more storyteller than scholar—not a bad role to be in if your job is to describe the loopy dance that America and booze have enjoyed together over the past few centuries.

Burns wisely chooses to track the larger forces at work through the lives of individual people; wisely, because the people who populate the narrative of booze in America are such an outlandish collection of zealots, crackpots, and criminals (and, occasionally, beleaguered sane people). The early temperance advocate Dr. Benjamin Rush, for example, proposed that abuse of spirits caused everything from “frequent and disgusting belchings” to scurvy and liver disorders to, in extreme cases, spontaneous combustion; Rush claimed to have witnessed a particularly drunken man belch—disgustingly, one can only assume—near a candle and become “suddenly destroyed” (p. 58). On the prodinking side it’s impossible not to be both horrified and amused by the