owners of one distillery in Kentucky, who, in 1913, offered to help the Keeley sanitarium in Chicago keep its wards full by selling it “a mailing list of over 50,000 individual consumers of liquor,” adding, “The list of names is new, live, and active” (p.172).

These colorful anecdotes and portraits plot the pendulum swings of America’s love affair with the idea of temperance, a passion nearly equal to its love of booze. From individual reformers like Rush to the national temperance movement that predated the Civil War to the rise of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union after the war, the pendulum swings back and forth, until finally it reaches the Anti-Saloon League, under the capable (and monomaniacal) leadership of Wayne Wheeler.

No single person can bear responsibility for Prohibition, “perhaps the worst idea ever proposed by a legislative body anywhere in the world for the ostensible goal of a better society,” as Burns puts it (p.5). Nevertheless, Wayne Wheeler comes close, and Burns’s narration of his campaign to ban drinking—the political maneuverings, the influence trading, the sheer dogged obstinate absolutism—that resulted in the Eighteenth Amendment’s being passed is impressive. (And as a portrait of a successful attempt by a zealous, moralistic minority to rewrite national law, it’s salutary reading for anyone not yet sufficiently perturbed by the Christian right’s influence on Washington today.)

Of course, illegalizing the sale of alcohol was one thing; stopping Americans from drinking proved quite another. People continued to drink during Prohibition; they simply bought and poured their drinks out of sight. But, as Burns notes, they took far more risks in doing so, and he’s not overstating the matter when he writes, “Poisoned booze was the great, unsung tragedy of Prohibition” (p.224). In the song The Jake Walk Blues from 1930, the Allen Brothers took bitter inspiration from the destructive neural palsy called Jake Leg:

I can’t eat, I can’t talk
Been drinkin’ mean jake, Lord, now can’t walk
Ain’t got nothin’ now to lose
Cause I’m a jake walkin’ papa with the jake walk blues.

Over time Jake Leg affected thousands of people, mostly poor, throughout the South and the Midwest. It was eventually determined to have been caused by Jamaican ginger extract—a popular Prohibition hooch, being nearly 80 percent alcohol—that had been adulterated with tri-ortho-cresyl phosphate, an industrial chemical used primarily as a hydraulic fluid. Burns describes a menagerie of other horrific forms of rotgut for good measure, among them “a Chicago specialty…Yack Yack Bourbon—main ingredient, iodine—and a Philadelphia favorite called Soda Pop Moon, sold in soft drink bottles, [which] depended for its insidious impact on rubbing alcohol” (p.220). He continues, “During a single four-day period in 1928, thirty-four people died in New York City alone from unwittingly drinking wood alcohol” (p.224). Of course, as he points out, the drinkers were unwitting; the bootleggers who produced the stuff were not.

One of the primary strengths of The Spirits in America—beyond Burns’s raconteurish affability—is the deftness with which it illuminates the complexities and tragedies that underlie the more familiar aspects of the history of America and alcohol. It’s a charming and entertaining book, to be sure; at times it’s also, as it should be, somewhat sobering.

—Ray Isle, Food & Wine

A History of the World in 6 Glasses
Tom Standage
New York: Walker & Company, 2005
viii + 311 pp. Illustrations. $25.00 (cloth)

With his cheerfully cheeky title, Tom Standage sets a tone, what might even be called an Economist (for which he is a technology writer) tone: seriously lighthearted, lightheartedly serious. An epigraph from Karl Popper introduces the approach: “There is no history of mankind, there are only many histories of all kinds of aspects of human life” (p.1). At its best, this way of looking at the world results in some original historical insights; at less than its best, a pleasant miscellany of drinks trivia.

The six drinks—all of them modifications of water—have affected human history in various ways, large and small. Beer, the ancient mother of them all, arose in the Fertile Crescent and like many drinks assumed multiple ceremonial, commercial, and civilizing roles. In the earliest written documents—Sumerian wage and tax records—the symbol for beer is one of the most common, and the oldest written recipe is for beer. Beer also served as currency. In a charming Mesopotamian pictogram from around 4000 BCE, two figures are depicted sipping beer through straws from a very large jar (p.11).

Coffee was one of several historically influential beverages that came to the West from the Arabic East—along with the coffee house. Once established in Europe, particularly in London, the coffee house functioned as an indispensable political and economic institution. The Wine of Islam
became the Drink of Reason, and the “coffee house Internet” was of singular importance in the dissemination of scientific and economic ideas generated by the New Reason.

Tea, for its part, was a foodstuff and a medicine in China before it was a drink—a common pattern. Tea came to Europe as a tonic and luxury item in the later sixteenth century and was made fashionable in Britain by the court of Charles II. As coffee helped to fuel the development of modern capitalism, tea helped to sustain its growth. The value of tea in the Industrial Revolution was considerable, particularly in the management of workers. “Tea breaks” kept people more alert, perhaps happier, and also, by preventing water-borne diseases, healthier. Beyond the clichés, it would be hard to exaggerate its significance in Britain. “The story of tea,” as Standage puts it, “reflects the reach and power, both innovative and destructive, of the British Empire” (p. 220).

Coca-Cola is declared the symbol par excellence of American industrialism-cum-consumerism. Carbonated water’s origin as “artificial mineral water,” and Coke’s earlier American incarnation as the “Intellectual Beverage and Temperance Drink,” have long been buried in the dregs of history’s glass. No product better represents American economic primacy in the twentieth century, or the advance of globalization, than Coca-Cola.

Additional chapters are devoted to wine and the Greek and Roman cultural values it embraced and extended, and to the role of spirits, sugar, and slavery in the Colonial period. But as the history of the world began in a puddle, or a cup of water, so it may end there. Standage takes a moment to mention a particular hobby-horse of his (see his blog), the bottled-water industry, reminding readers that most bottled water comes from public supplies and costs more than the bottled-water industry, reminding readers that most bottled water comes from public supplies and costs more than gasoline, while “for many people in the developing world, access to water remains a matter of life or death” (p. 269).

Control of sources may ultimately define our own century.

But Standage comes to edify, not to scold. An NPR reviewer I chanced to hear in early September enthusiastically endorsed A History of the World in 6 Glasses as his favorite book of the summer, clarifying a question I had been asking myself: To whom is this book addressed? The “summer book” audience? I imagined Standage had a higher brow in mind, so it is puzzling that his editors (presumably) felt compelled to identify such figures as Plato (“Athenian philosopher” [p. 8]) and even Stalin (“brutal Soviet leader” [p. 256]). There are no footnotes, and the notes are casual.

So I, for one, am convinced that A History of the World in 6 Glasses is—and ought to be!—destined for afterlife as a public TV series. It seems a perfect match. Meanwhile, it is a good read, full of information, never less than engaging, and occasionally profound. Don’t take it to the beach. Take it on the subway.

—Alison Ryley, Research Librarian Emerita, New York Public Library

Sustenance & Desire: A Food Lover’s Anthology of Sensuality and Humor
Edited and with paintings by Bascove
Boston, MA: David R. Godine, 2004
222 pp. Illustrations. $24.95 (cloth)

Sustenance & Desire: A Food Lover’s Anthology of Sensuality and Humor is, like a love affair, by turns lyrical, meditative, hilarious, disappointing, and soul-satisfying. Bascove, a New York artist who has edited two previous anthologies (on New York City’s bridges and on the pleasures of reading), here compiles seventy-seven pieces of prose, humor, and poetry linked by themes of food, hunger, longing, and desire, illustrated with her paintings.

She has gathered at her feast an impressive mix of literary luminaries from around the world: Vladimir Nabokov, Marcel Proust, and Pablo Neruda show up alongside May Sarton, Kakuzo Okakura, Joyce Carol Oates, Calvin Trillin, Czesław Miłosz, and Virginia Woolf, to drop just a few of the many names within. The book is divided into four sections—“Nourishment,” “Desire,” “Hunger,” and “Sustenance”—each introduced by a series of hors d’oeuvre–like quotations to set the mood (though the collection overall, to its detriment, lacks an introduction). M.F.K. Fisher gorgeously opens the section on nourishment: “I still think that one of the pleasantest of all emotions is to know that I, with my brain and my hands, have nourished my beloved few, that I have concocted a stew or a story, a rarity or a plain dish, to sustain them truly against the hungers of the world” (p. 12). And it is her classic, stunning meditation “Why Do You Write about Food?” (from The Gastronomical Me) that greets us as we enter the main body of this opening section. Jhumpa Lahiri draws us further in a few pages later. “I am the daughter of former pirates” (p. 19), she announces at the beginning of her lyrical essay “Indian Takeout,” before she goes on to describe the white poppy seeds and date syrup resin, the contraband cumin, squash, and lentils that constituted the booty her parents spirited back to Rhode Island in an old satin-lined suitcase on visits to her mother’s native Calcutta.

Roy Blount, Jr. offers up a couple of deeply hilarious, loveable pieces—a parodic restaurant roundup and the rhyming “Dream Song”—and Diane Ackerman elegantly