of course, food. One may enjoy reading about James Fenimore Cooper as the founder and president of the Bread & Cheese Club of New York, or reading John Updike’s description of his favorite meal, or perusing a review of Suetonius’s The Lives of the Twelve Caesars that features the tale of Vitellius. Written with such precision, the words themselves create even more visual imagery than do the illustrations by Saul Steinberg. These very words may also prevent the reader from truly engaging and appreciating such a delicacy. Perhaps, penned in the spirit of translation, Buzzi’s words tend to be rigid instead of gentle, archaic instead of modern, at times disjointed instead of fluid. Little assistance is given to the student (reader), who is expected to have knowledge of the Vehling edition of Apicius’s Cookery and Dining in Imperial Rome, to know Carlo Emilio Gadda’s Acquainted with Grief, and to be well acquainted with Marinetti’s philosophical treatise The Futurist Cookbook. Yet even though it is aimed at experts in the field of food culture, even the novice gastronome will be enticed by Buzzi’s recounting of such great recipes as stuffed pigeon, Galen’s white soup, and latsch.

—Myron Beasley, Brown University

Don’t Try This at Home: Culinary Catastrophes from the World’s Greatest Chefs
Edited by Kimberly Witherspoon and Andrew Friedman
New York: Bloomsbury, 2005
320 pp. $24.95 (cloth)

Masses of escaped eels on the kitchen floor, slimy against the ankles of cooks. Pavarotti, late but not really hungry. Failed ciabatta mashed potatoes. Jackie O, pedaling away on her bike, denied a reservation. Scooping up spilled hollandaise sauce from the nasty floor of an old Datsun station wagon… and putting it back on the food. Each night as I picked up this book to read another of its forty stories, I hesitated. Did I want to know about pheasant that is really chicken in disguise? Meringue that is actually a white garbage bag… teased, powdered, and minted? Don’t Try This at Home: Culinary Catastrophes from the World’s Greatest Chefs reveals the mishaps that have befallen the culinary stars of our time.

We have seen or heard many of these chefs on television or radio, and their voices ring familiar here. Anthony Bourdain swears for us; Michael Lomonaco enchants us; and Sara Moulton quietly mocks herself. But the standouts in this collection are the stories told by chefs who do not have daily appearances on American cookery shows. Pino Luongo’s “A User’s Guide to Opening a Hamptons Restaurant” combines humor, astute class observation, and dire warnings about staffing. Tamasin Day-Lewis’s eloquent multigenerational story, “Euphoria,” teaches us that kitchen disaster stories “spurred [her] on, made [her] realize that failure, kitchen disaster, was not only an option, it was a given” (p.110).

I’m not usually in awe of professional chefs or any other kind of celebrity and am confirmed in my impression that any celebrity who tries to appear humble often comes across as insincere. Although some insincerity is apparent in this collection, overall the chorus amusingly returns to the theme of “I messed up. We messed up. Nobody was the wiser for it, until now.” Apart from occasional self-aggrandizement (several contributors pronounce that failure is not an option when working in the professional kitchen), this volume offers entertaining insights into the community of chefs and restaurateurs who respect each other, work with each other, fire each other, and laugh at one another.

—Traci Marie Kelly, University of Wisconsin–Madison

The Devil’s Picnic: Around the World in Pursuit of Forbidden Fruit
Taras Grescoe
New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005
368 pp. $23.95 (cloth)

Ever since Taras Grescoe first read about absinthe as a teenager, he felt the lure of the illicit, and The Devil’s Picnic details his travels and adventures to seven different countries in search of “forbidden fruit.” Grescoe casts himself as the central character in his travel adventures as he interviews colorful local informants, officials, and experts. Although he relates his experiences of intoxication amid carefully researched historical material, he is more of a journalist than a scholar; the book has no index or bibliography. Yet each chapter brims with lore, vivid descriptions, and detailed observations.

In Norway, Grescow sampled moonshine; in Singapore, he smuggled in crackers baked with illegal poppy seeds; and in France, he savored Époisses, a raw-milk cheese. He dined on bull testicles and baby eels in Spain, puffed on Cuban cigars in the United States, and drank mate de coca in Bolivia. In Switzerland, he finally sampled his long-desired absinthe and visited a euthanasia clinic that dispenses deadly pentobarbital sodium.
Grescoe explains that, owing to a culture of binge drinking, Norway has a history of alcohol prohibition. The government controls the sale of alcohol, reaping significant revenues from taxes and markups. Twenty-five percent of the alcohol consumed in the country is illegal, however. The distilling of hjemmebrent, 190-proof moonshine, represents the homegrown economy’s response to expensive legal alcohol. Just as Eskimos have a variety of words for snow, so too do Norwegians have specialized words for different kinds of hangovers.

As for Époisses, dubbed the king of cheeses by Brillat-Savarin, we learn that it is so odiferous that carrying it on the Paris metro is illegal. A fatal outbreak of listeriosis in 1999 was traced back to the raw milk in Époisses, causing it to be banned in the United States. Cresco explores the battle between the desire to protect regional differences within the European Union and the standardization demanded by foreign trade.

Grescoe then takes us to La Paz, Bolivia, at thirteen thousand feet the highest capital in the world, where first-time visitors are often struck with altitude sickness. The local herbal remedy is mate de coca, tea brewed from coca leaves. Mate de coca and coca leaf chewing are integral parts of Andean life, and the leaves are ritually offered to guests as a feature of hospitality; the processed coca leaves that become cocaine are another substance altogether, a drug commodity principally for export. The coca plant eradication program sponsored by the United States as part of the war on drugs exemplifies a downside of the global economy and the vestiges of colonialism.

Not all forbidden fruits are intoxicants, however. The bull testicles Cresco tasted in Spain have fallen out of favor due to contemporary food trends, which lean toward muscle rather than organ meat. North Americans will likely shy away from Mexican dishes like barbacoa made from a cow’s brains, cheeks, lips, and tongue—marinated, slow cooked, and folded into tortillas.

Gresco uses himself as the measure of all things. His strong libertarian views on personal choice and moderation are tempered by recognition of the societal need for public health, moral hygiene, and propriety. He does not theorize about the nature of forbidden fruit but rather editorializes, raising such provocative questions as: What happens when sacred food travels and loses its cultural moorings? How does location determine the rituals attendant to a food or beverage? What do prohibitions say about who we are?

—Gregory Gould, Albuquerque, NM