carbon compounds to process twenty-first-century food for the masses—they become subversive.

Copious liner notes and downloadable audio files are available at Herbert's Web site, www.platdujour.co.uk.

—Seth Rogovoy, Berkshire Living

Bookends

Last Bite: A Novel of Culinary Romance
Nancy Verde Barr
Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2006
304 pp. $22.95 (cloth)

The heroine of Nancy Verde Barr’s novel, Casey (K.C.) Costello, works as an executive chef on a morning TV show, prepping dishes for guest cooks and for her long-time mentor, Sally Woods. As she describes her job, “When you watch a food show and see all those little bowls of measured-out ingredients...and when a finished dish miraculously appears from under the counter, that’s because someone like me is backstage getting it all together” (p.2).

Barr knows that backstage world intimately, and she writes about it with detail, clarity, humor, and the expertise born of working for Julia Child for nearly twenty years. It’s a lot of fun to read about the mishaps that occur—a chunk of lobster that goes down the wrong way, necessitating the Heimlich maneuver and several retakes—and how seven pans of tarte tatin produce that gorgeously perfect one we see on camera. And Julia Child recycles quite well in Sally Woods, the character modeled on Child right down to the wrinkles, the zesty warmth, and the husband who worked in intelligence.

Adept as she is with all the culinary aspects of her book, Barr falters when she moves Casey out of the kitchen, whether to her extended Italian/Irish family’s Sunday dinners, the trendy Manhattan restaurant run by her Irish love-interest chef, or the Italian settings where the exceedingly faint intrigue element of the plot works itself out. There’s a villain who poses a threat to Sally and therefore to Casey, but he never strays beyond his cardboard outlines. There’s a mystery, sort of, but its resolution shouts out to the reader long before all is revealed. In short, despite a fragment of sex here and a soupçon of suspense there, the passages devoted to conventional romance, as announced by Last Bite’s subtitle, are more perfunctory, less passionate, and much less enjoyable than those devoted to cookery.

—Josephine Woll, Howard University

The Vinegar of Spilamberto and Other Italian Adventures with Food, Places, and People
Doris Muscatine
New York: Avalon (Shoemaker and Hoard), 2005
281 pp. Illustrations, photograph, and map. $25.00 (cloth)

In this wide-ranging memoir Doris Muscatine, a distinguished wine and food writer, offers a collection of cheerful reminiscences about traveling and living in Italy. Her adventures in Italy began when she accompanied her husband and their two small children to spend a Fulbright year in Rome in 1958, but to put this life-transforming experience into context, she begins the book with an affectionate discussion of the “food voice” developed during her childhood in the white upper-middle-class world of postwar suburban New Jersey. First as a professor’s wife and then as a frequent visitor to Italy, Muscatine chronicles her life, which follows the trajectory of the transformation of American food sensibilities since World War II.

Hers is a familiar story of the American discovery of postwar Italy, largely through cooking and eating with Italian friends and acquaintances proud and patient enough to explain and to teach their foodways to eager audiences. Her story also shows how well the Fulbright program functioned as a builder of bridges between cultures after the destruction of World War II. Wealthy Americans, particularly those with academic pedigrees, were welcomed into the genteel world of their European counterparts.

The book contains a very interesting, detailed description of the production and classification of balsamic vinegar—the vinegar of the title (an earlier version of this chapter was published in Gastronomica). Muscatine was drawn to this particular subject because of her expertise in wine production, and in fact the chapter contains only one suggestion about how to eat or cook with this special vinegar (toss it with fresh strawberries and freshly ground black pepper). Another fascinating chapter, revealing her considerable familiarity with the international gourmet food business, focuses on truffle production and consumption in France and Italy and describes recent efforts in California to cultivate them.

Muscatine adopts the lighthearted tone of magazine travel and food writing. She must have kept detailed diaries throughout her travels in order to be able to write about her memories in such detail. The experiences she describes are not connected thematically, aside from the general enthusiasm she feels about her memorable experiences in Italy and her Italian friends. The book is full of great ideas for traveling in Italy and provides a charming model for those interested in following offbeat itineraries.

—Alison Smith, Wagner College