On the level of analysis, Krondl also falls short, a problem he probably could have avoided had he read the literature of those pesky academics. For instance, he argues that pepper imports did not keep pace with population increase in the early fifteenth century (p.256). But research indicates that pepper imports increased at a higher rate than population growth in this period.

Can anything positive be said about Krondl’s book? Yes, certainly. His chapter on Amsterdam is quite good, and his explanation of Galenic theory is excellent. Had he paid as much attention to the rest of the story this could have been a much better book. In fairness, Krondl took on a complex project that has defeated many before him.

—Clifford A. Wright, Santa Monica, CA

NOTES
2. Melink-Roelofsz, Asian Trade, 89.

The Herbalist in the Kitchen
Gary Allen

Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007
xiv + 483pp. Illustrations. $65.00 (cloth)

This well-researched, well-documented book on plants used in the preparation of food and drink is maddeningly difficult to use: there is no index of herbs and spices by either their common or Latin names. Gary Allen approaches his subject from the perspective of a botanist; all plants are grouped alphabetically within their botanical family. This means that the only way for the average cook to find a particular herb or spice is to read laboriously through the contents pages, checking the small print carefully. Even knowing the Latin name for the plant doesn’t help, because this is not always obviously related to the family name. Allen includes the names of plants in as many languages as he has been able to find, which may be useful for the traveler in search of an ingredient in a foreign market, but a foreign national, or a returned traveler wanting to find an English name for a particular plant, would find this book too tiresome to consult. Cross-references without page numbers are equally annoying.

That said, it is useful to know which plants belong to the same family, and this enables cooks to see to what extent they bear family resemblance. Once you start reading, Allen displays a broad knowledge of his subject. He almost always gives the chemical compounds responsible for the aroma and flavor profile of the plants, which is helpful in recognizing similarities with other herbs and spices, and when thinking about complementary flavors.

The scope of the book is wide. It is very thorough on popular herbs and spices such as basil, mint, chile, pepper, clove, nutmeg. For some, such as rosemary, Allen suggests the best culinary cultivars. However, pursuing botanical accuracy, he neglects to include mace as a separate spice from nutmeg within the contents list, and cubeb, long pepper, and pepper leaves can be found only if the reader knows to look under “pepper.” Such absences are irritating for the nonbotanist.

A substantial part of the book reminds us that plants we may not usually think of as flavorings can have a role in the kitchen: roses, violets, marigolds, and other scented flowers. Dried rosebuds, petals and rosewater are widely used in Middle Eastern cooking, and fresh petals flavor English salads and desserts. On a visit to the Republic of Georgia a few years ago, I found dried French marigold petals, Tagetes patula, sold in markets everywhere. They are an essential flavoring, a key component of khmeli-suneli, a Georgian (not Russian, as Allen has it) aromatic blend that includes dried mint, dill, savory, and fenugreek with coriander and fennel seed.

There are plants we now neglect—amaranth, nettles, dandelions (excellent blanched under a flower pot as well as eaten green), alexanders, mallows, sea kale—that are worth reclaiming. Some plants sound tempting and intriguing—stevia, frangipani, skullcap, myrrh, maidenhair fern—but most of these offer little for the domestic cook; their use is minimal and mostly restricted to manufactured food and drinks. The use of others is essentially medicinal—boldo, echinacea, and St. John’s wort, for example, while the FDA limits the use of yet others to alcoholic drinks only.
Of the old “pot herbs” the book includes only carrot and celery; no turnip, no onion, although garlic and chives are there, and mirepoix is included in the flavoring mixtures.

Allen has done extensive research into plants used for flavoring in cuisines around the world, many of them little known outside their immediate region. For several of these he can only record the minimum, but this may encourage culinary travelers to seek out these and other, as yet, unknown flavorings. I recently came across buchu in South Africa, an indigenous garrigue-like plant, smelling pungently of pennyroyal backed by citrus notes, with a bitter taste. It was used, in a tiny quantity, to flavor well a vegetable soup. Allen refers to its use in flavoring South African wines, which may once have been true, but given the quality of South African winemaking today it seems dubious.

The flavoring ingredients of the Americas, Japan, and Southeast Asia are well documented, but those of Australia, the Indian subcontinent, and the Middle East are at times rather sketchy. The masalas of the different Indian regions are not noted, nor is sambhar powder or dhana jeera. Allen claims that “In Arabic-speaking areas of the Middle East and Africa, ras el hanout is a mainstay of every kitchen” (p. 431). It is certainly widely used across the Mahgreb, but is hardly known in the Middle East: every country from Turkey to the tiniest Gulf State has its own baharat, or spice mix, simpler than ras el hanout, and often containing more chile. I cannot agree with his assertion that ras el hanout and dukka are similar. The latter is an Egyptian blend of nuts, sesame seeds, and a few spices, eaten at breakfast or as a snack, whereas ras el hanout, used to flavor tagines and other stews, has the complex flavors of some twenty or more spices, including black and green cardamom, cassia, cloves, cubeb, ginger, grains of paradise, rosebuds, orris root, lavender, and mace.

There is more to say about the use of pomegranate throughout the Middle East, from the use of the fruit in salads to the complex dishes of vegetables and meat flavored with juice or molasses, culminating in Iran’s fesenjan. Only by browsing did I come upon a brief paragraph about mastic, preceded by one on Australian black wattle (the connection is the acacia species); I did not find information on mahlab, akudjura, or the micromerias used in Balkan and Italian cooking.

There are few references to British cooking; one mentions bistort being used in Easter ledges pudding, but this herb pudding, made with a mixture of edible young wild herbs (ledges was a country name for bistort), disappeared in the first half of the twentieth century.

Allen concludes with a helpful glossary of definitions of the chemical names that occur in the text, interspersed with entries on some herb and spice mixtures and their constituents, an extensive list of sources, and a bibliography.

There is much valuable reference material in this book; it is a pity it is so frustrating to use.

—Jill Norman, author, Herbs & Spices

**The Downright Epicure:**

*Essays on Edward Bunyard (1878–1939)*

Edited by Edward Wilson

Totnes, Devon, UK: Prospect Books, 2007

400 pp. £30 ($60.00) (cloth)

English nurseryman, pomologist, and gastronomic scholar Edward Bunyard is relatively little known these days; to take a current measure of recognition, at the time of this writing there is not even a Wikipedia article devoted to his life and work. Yet an individual such as Bunyard represents a larger portion of the fabric of a time and place than the historical figures at the heads of parliaments and armies.

Heir of a century-old family nursery in Maidstone, Kent, Bunyard was educated at home due to unspecified “poor health” and never attended university. He nonetheless came to write books including *The Anatomy of Dessert* and *The Epicure’s Companion*, as well as articles and catalog copy, and even presented work on Mendelian genetics to the Royal Horticultural Society, where he served as a member of the governing council during most of the last decade of his life. A bachelor of no recorded passionate life (a refreshing contrast to the present age of oversharing), he traveled extensively on the Continent for both professional reasons and leisure, which largely overlapped; he eventually befriended members of the Bloomsbury Group, including Harold Nicolson and Vita Sackville-West.

Even as Bunyard relished his role of gentleman scholar and latter-day Renaissance man, he witnessed economic and social changes that would make lives like his own increasingly rare, if not impossible. Acknowledging that American land-grant universities represented the future of horticultural research, and envying their resources, he resisted some of the implications of that approach, sometimes to the detriment of his business. Favoring varieties of apples and other fruits for flavor instead of yield or ability to be shipped, and avoiding the trend toward more profitable monocultures, he anticipated concerns now voiced by Wendell Berry, Carlo Petrini, and Vandana...