magazine (Kinnunen), the “cosmopolitan project” of the contemporary food media landscape (Chi), Finnish film (Valkola), and Estonian tourism (M. Itkonen). Among the more unusual topics explored is what Adhi Nugraha considers the “imbalance” between tableware and food in some “ethnic” restaurants. Among her examples is the besek, an Indonesian meal box traditionally woven from banana leaves. A contemporary besek is manufactured from plastic, and although it is more economical and in some ways more practical, it is an unsuitable vessel for the totality of the besek experience.

It is difficult to tell if the collection’s textual shortcomings lie with individual authors and/or the translators and/or the editors, or if the different styles of rhetoric reflect the disciplinary and cultural divides among the Finnish, Canadian, American, and Indonesian authors who describe themselves as (among other titles) chef, criminologist, philosopher, scholar, and writer. The quality of writing is inconsistent and, at times, problematic, so that even when a noteworthy argument is registered—such as the unidirectional synesthesia of food writing—it is sometimes obfuscated. Repeated lapses in grammar or syntax, mostly confined to the translated chapters, confound an author’s intentions and break the reader’s concentration. For example, should “clear defined” be read as “clearly defined” or “clear, defined”? Or does the author really mean “clear defined”?

The potential for translation-related problems is one of the attractions of works such as this one. The fact that someone else’s words require translation for me to begin to understand them foregrounds the phenomenology of the experience of thinking. During one of the several pauses needed while laboring through the first of two forewords, I mused that commencing the book while en route to the port city of Genoa, where “bunches of basil [are] arranged like flowers” (p.48) and borage can be plucked from pots on a terrace, to the resort town of Portofino, where the more unusual topics explored is what Adhi Nugraha considers the “imbalance” between tableware and food in some “ethnic” restaurants. Among her examples is the besek, an Indonesian meal box traditionally woven from banana leaves. A contemporary besek is manufactured from plastic, and although it is more economical and in some ways more practical, it is an unsuitable vessel for the totality of the besek experience.

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It’s both the tweaking—and recovery—of culinary tradition that lie at the heart of The Lost Ravioli Recipes of Hoboken as Laura Schenone, first to her surprise and then to her growing consternation, discovers that a critical ingredient in her Genoese great-grandmother’s much-vaulted ravioli recipe was, horror of horrors, none other than Philadelphia Cream Cheese. “I am searching for an authentic family recipe and I get the unctuously rich cream cheese…à la Kraft Foods…That cannot be right. No, this cannot be right at all” (p.20), she writes. Faced with that kind of revelation, most of us, I suppose, would simply shrug our shoulders and chalk it up idiosyncratically to “just one of those things.” But not Schenone. Determined to figure out how and why several generations of her family knowingly incorporated this mass-produced, quintessentially American product into their painstakingly assembled pasta, she sets out for the Old Country. Along the way, she not only discovers prescinseua, the Ligurian equivalent—but better—of American-style cream cheese, but she also experiences a number of valuable life lessons. Schenone comes to realize that her all-too-romanticized vision of the past was no match for its hardscrabble reality; that life in contemporary New Jersey, for all of its defects, is to be prized; and that some family secrets are best left unlocked.

An amiable companion and an able writer, Schenone takes her readers on a whirlwind tour of Liguria, from its port city of Genoa, where “bunches of basil [are] arranged like flowers” (p.48) and borage can be plucked from pots on a terrace, to the resort town of Portofino, where the locals not only eat well but look good, too. As she travels from place to place, we are introduced to nimble home cooks and big-hearted restaurateurs, supremely dedicated chestnut farmers, and latter-day champions of traditional Mediterranean cuisine. Back home, we also spend time exploring various aspects of experiences of and with food.
in Hoboken, where we learn of its traditions, from cannoli boxes filled mysteriously with money in lieu of pastry to pasta sauced with tomatoes.

Drawing on the well-worn genre of culinary tourism, The Lost Ravioli Recipes of Hoboken seems at times indistinguishable from other travel accounts that speak hungrily of the way an apricot from Provence, say, tastes so much better than any other apricot (see p.192 for a similar encomium to the Ligurian apricot), or that offer the obligatory insight that clarity comes from travel, or that rave about the sunrise. What saves Schenone’s narrative, rendering it distinctive, has little to do with its insights and everything to do with its geographical context: here, the comparatively little-known region of Liguria takes the place of the better-known Provence, where smoked chestnut flour receives the approbation customarily reserved for olives or a Bandol rosé. Essentially a salute to Liguria and its foodways, The Lost Ravioli Recipes of Hoboken is at its best when it is anchored in the details.

By the time the book winds down, Schenone has come to terms with her family’s legacy. She realizes, as do we, that the substitution of cream cheese for prescienza is no glaring culinary faux pas but rather an authentic gesture, wholly appropriate to its time, place, and family circle. Tradition, she realizes at the end of her travels, is what we make of it. As an added grace note, The Lost Ravioli Recipes of Hoboken ends with what might well be construed as a peace offering: the Schenone family’s recipes for ravioli and dozens of other pasta pleasures. They are lost no more.

—Jenna Weissman Joselit, Princeton University

C. Anne Wilson
Totnes, Devon: Prospect Books, 2006
310 pp. Illustrations. $60.00 (cloth)

A walk into my local liquor store, a discount shop in an ordinary neighborhood, reveals booze, straight-on, no-frills quick-and-dirty alcohol, the kind one slugs from a brown bag and rarely the kind whose labels you’d display in a liquor cabinet at home. In the back of the store, tucked away and dusty, there are a few bottles of things like Courvoisier, or V.S.O.P. Cognac, or Blue Sapphire gin, show-off things. Not the place where the readership of C. Anne Wilson’s scholarly tome on distilled beverages would congregate. But my store is a place where the mass-marketed products of the thousands of years of history of distillation that she painstakingly documents are purchased for comfort and pleasure.

Wilson’s treatment of these beverages includes the scientific, historical, religious, and mythological/literary background of distillation and its uses. We learn about the relation between distillation and alchemy, incense, and parfumerie. Ultimately, the best and most legitimate of the products of alchemy might have been an unintended consequence: liquor, or the transformation of base organic material into the golden beverages we now consume gratefully. The theory of the four elements—earth, water, air, and fire—and the changing understandings of material things that underlay them are connected through this narrative focused on liquor. We also read of the relation between aqua vitae—the water of life—and the body of Jesus on the Cross, the distillation of holy water into something that symbolically connects heaven and earth, and how ultimately it was gin that was used by the Templars as the baptismal liquid. In the end, and with telling effect, Wilson’s book comes to the conclusion that distillation was created through man’s desire to be immortal.

Wilson’s strengths as a scholar make the first part of the book, on distillation of wine and the four elements, on Dionysus and early Christians and the Arabs and alchemy, the most detailed and scientific. I am fascinated by the connection between chemistry and the sacred, and among magic, religion, and science: we now draw these lines more distinctively and not always to good purpose. I am delighted by the fact that Chaucer appears to have known the chemistry of alchemy and distillation, and that there is wry social commentary in The Threepenny Opera, where one lady of the street offers a very ladylike alcoholic confection to another. But the ordinary reader, like myself, finds the juice of the story later on, as the contradictions of the early experiments (religious/secular; gods/men; science/magic) get played out in the experiences of drinking closer to the present. So I will dwell on the second half of the book, having earned it, I feel, from a careful slog through the great scientific and historical detail of the “living water,” intended to cure death itself, that has come to be our scotch-on-the-rocks.

The mysteries of “burning water” or aqua ardens, the ardent water, in the Middle Ages, were employed in the discovery of heresy. The initiation by fire was through the use of distilled alcohol: if your hair, anointed with the liquor, burned, then so would you in hell…and if you survived, you were “saved.” Other uses to which aqua vitae was put by the ancients might also look strange today: for the cure of headache or spots before the eyes, or for curing stuttering (overuse