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, while 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 prescinseua 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
of alcohol today might be seen as leading to these conditions, not away from them). We find accounts of spirit-testing by placing some of the liquid in a spoon and holding it just over gunpowder: if there is a satisfactory blast, the spirits are strong enough. The inventions of saccharometers and hydrometers would later make such exciting tests unnecessary.

I would like to try some of the recipes for things that now would fall under the label “controlled substances,” such as the 1727 recipe for liquid laudanum, which actually sounds lovely: a quart of sack, ½ pt spirits of distilled wine, 4 oz. opium, sliced, 2 oz. saffron. Set all in the sun to mingle for twenty days, strain the liquid off, and bottle for immediate use (p.233). And did you know that the word punch for the delightfully spiked party beverage is actually a product of the British Raj? Punch, or panch, in Hindi means “five,” and there were always five ingredients to a proper colonial punch: wine, brandy, nutmeg, sugar, and lemon.

As Wilson’s book progresses towards the modern era, it loses some of its scholarly detail, and even the anecdotal information falls away just as my interest has been piqued for more current historical treatments. We do learn about the effects of world wars on drinking; World War I meant the beginning of controls on pub hours by the Defence of the Realm Act of 1914, and in the United States, Prohibition meant the effects of world wars on drinking: World War I meant the beginning of controls on pub hours by the Defence of the Realm Act of 1914, and in the United States, Prohibition would call for, the history of spirits from fire-bearing, man-made magic to medicine to pick-me-up to social beverages. Whether it inspires similar upheavals in the lives of its readers, Sheridan Warrick’s The Way to Make Wine will help anyone successfully make wine at home. The key to Warrick’s book is its intuitive organization and thoroughly informative writing. Any guidebook should be read before starting the project and referred to as needed once the project is underway. Warrick grasps this perfectly. His prose is eminently readable, and the armchair vintner will find it difficult to put down. The text is brilliantly laid out so that the wine-stained vintner can find a critical section in a crisis.

In the first section Warrick devotes a chapter to each step in the winemaking process. The section “Making Even Better Wine” delves further into the techniques and shares strategies for obtaining quality winegrapes. This section includes analytical instruction and culminates in the chapter “Making the Wine You Wish You’d Made.”

What you cannot learn here in this fine book is intriguing. For example, why is it that spirits are called spirits? Is it because spirit can mean the essence of something, created in this case by reduction and distillation? I also find fault with an insufficiently detailed index: if we are to have one, let it be thoroughly done. In addition, I would have liked to see in a book purporting to tell the complete story of wine distilling and spirits something of their non-Western history and use. It is interesting to see a reference to ancient Egypt and to Chinese alchemy, but that is as far as it goes—the environments in which the lines are traced are almost exclusively European, with some North American and Caribbean references. Lacking the breadth that the depth would call for, the history of spirits from fire-bearing, man-made magic to medicine to pick-me-up to social beverages seems less satisfying. These flaws, in an otherwise most interesting work, do not detract from what there is: I just want more. On the rocks, if you please.

—Merry White, Boston University

The Way to Make Wine: How to Craft Superb Table Wines at Home
Sheridan Warrick
Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006
xiv + 252 pp. $19.95 (paper)

My career in winemaking began when I chanced upon Judith Irwin’s Homemade Wine. After some successful (and a few disastrous) home winemaking efforts, I pursued a degree in viticulture and enology. Winemaking now pays the bills. Whether it inspires similar upheavals in the lives of its readers, Sheridan Warrick’s The Way to Make Wine will help anyone successfully make wine at home.

My career in winemaking began when I chanced upon Judith Irwin’s Homemade Wine. After some successful (and a few disastrous) home winemaking efforts, I pursued a degree in viticulture and enology. Winemaking now pays the bills. Whether it inspires similar upheavals in the lives of its readers, Sheridan Warrick’s The Way to Make Wine will help anyone successfully make wine at home.