Books about African American foodways, historical or contemporary, are few and far enough between to make it disappointing that the essays in African American Foodways: Explorations of History and Culture seem to have been shoehorned randomly into the covers. I did not get the feeling that these essays were originally written for this volume. The two sections of essays are mismatched; the first, “The History of African and African American Food,” on its origins and culinary history during slavery, is clumsily juxta- posed to section two, “Representations of African American Food,” comprised of essays on cookbooks, literature, and movies. The second section might better have explored specific issues of contemporary African American foodways, such as community garden initiatives or the continuing problem of access to fairly priced foodstuffs in inner-city supermarkets. None of the essays mention prenatal nutrition, low-birth-weight babies, or low rates of breastfeeding by African American mothers. I understand that this one book cannot address all the pressing social issues affecting the African American community, but of those issues directly affected by foodways I would expect some mention of possible connections.

The introduction by the editor, Anne L. Bower, focuses on Soul Food, the movie. Given that Psyche Williams-Forson’s book, Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs (2006), has only recently been published, Bower’s largely derivative restating of the Williams-Forson examination of the same film is redundant and not nearly as interesting. It is time that this movie be retired from having to carry the entire weight of scholarly interpretation of contemporary African American foodways.

The first section contains the strongest essay in the entire volume, Anne Yentsch’s archaeological study, “Excavating the South’s African American Food History.” Using studies of faunal remains and primary written sources, Yentsch examines changes in dietary habits by nineteenth-century plantation laborers under slavery and into the early twentieth century by black farmers and sharecroppers. Robert Hall’s “Food Crops, Medicinal Plants, and the Atlantic Slave Trade” describes food crops early African societies ate before and after European introduction of New World crops. I would have expected to see evidence of more recent scholarship in his material.

Sociologist William Whit’s “Soul Food as Cultural Creation” creates as many stereotypes as it seeks to debunk. In several cases the arguments he makes are just plain wrong, and he cites material clearly gathered third and fourth hand rather than up-to-date sources. He allows for no culinary nuance; whites get the best of the pig, slaves get the offal. He seems to be unaware of the wide use of pork offal or innards prepared as souse, or scrapple, or head-cheese, or blood sausage, not only by the enslaved but as popular dishes widely served in the South in white homes throughout the nineteenth century. With the exception of the Yentsch essay there are few references to the skills of the enslaved as expert agriculturalists, as skilled husbandmen and women, as gardeners, as hearth cooks.

The volume shifts to cultural and literary interpretations in the second section. In “From Fiction to Foodways: Working at the Intersections of African American Literary and Culinary Studies,” Doris Witt explores the way the concept of soul food emerges in cookbooks and other African American literature. The negative ways young black men feel about examining their own cultural history through foodways is the topic of Psyche Williams-Forson’s “Chicken and Chains: Using African American Foodways to Understand Black Identities.” Three professional black cooks working and writing on their experiences in the nineteenth century are the subjects of Rafia Zafar’s essay, “Recipes for Respect: Black Hospitality Entrepreneurs before World War I.” But instead of providing a conclusion connecting these scattered essays, Bower ends with a bland essay, “Recipes for History: The National Council of Negro Women’s Five Historical Cookbooks” on the evolution of the five cookbooks produced by that group between 1958 and 1998.

This volume might be of limited interest to a reader who has already read widely on African and African American history. But for a new student of African American foodways it would be a poor introduction.

—Leni Sorensen, Researcher, Monticello

A Workman Is Worthy of His Meat:
Food and Colonialism in the Gabon Estuary
Jeremy Rich
Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2007
(France Overseas: Studies in Empire and Decolonization)
xx + 220 pp. Map. $45.00 (cloth)

This interesting, short book describes the history of food in the coastal cities of Gabon, a region of equatorial Africa
claimed by France as her colony in the mid-nineteenth century, and ruled from Paris through the local capital city of Libreville, just inside the cape that separates the Atlantic from the estuary named in the book’s title. By the time of the country’s independence in 1960, people in the coastal cities had integrated their ideas about food into the expanse of France’s empire, but they had also surrendered their food security. Today, they import two-thirds of what they consume, in part because of their preference to eat, and to be seen eating, foreign foods.

Jeremy Rich discovers the roots of the modern predicament in the country’s colonial past, but he shuns a simplistic explanation of imperial hegemony to develop an account of these Africans’ creativity in changing their relationships with food. While the estuary’s fishers and farmers exported food to slave ships in the era of the trans-Atlantic trade, newcomers arriving from the nineteenth century on approached indigenous food with learned caution. New to the cities were French bureaucrats and businessmen, deported Vietnamese convicts, conscripted Senegalese soldiers, American missionaries and merchants, and wage-seekers from Liberia, the Gold Coast (now Ghana), and Gabon’s interior regions. Each contributed farming techniques, recipes, preferences, and ideas about alimentation to an always-changing, heterogeneous local culture of food that was (and continues to be) every bit as cosmopolitan as that offered in peer capitals. Their culinary repertoire drew on the world’s pantry: baguettes and “bush meat” taken from forests, imported milk and local manioc, Asian rice and native palm oil, and much more.

Rich organizes his efforts in chapters with thematic foci—including consumption, immigration, famine, and urban life—and they progress in a roughly chronological fashion, though with considerable overlaps in time. It is a rhetorical strategy that asks much of readers, who need continually to integrate for themselves the sort of political economy offered in Chapter 1’s overview and then the thematic content of previous chapters into the sections they are reading.

The author’s focus on food supply as a way of asking questions about empire means that readers more interested in coastal Gabon’s culture of eating, cooking techniques, and the intersection of gender history and food will want to continue on elsewhere—including to Rich’s many good journal contributions, listed in this book’s bibliography. There are missed opportunities in the book to relate this food history to the rich scholarship of eating beyond Africa, or to integrate the estuary’s culinary past into the well-developed historiography of popular culture in colonial Africa.

Gabon is one of Africa’s least-studied countries, particularly in Anglophone scholarship but even in French academic domains. Gastronomica readers would therefore find good company in wishing for a stronger and more immediately announced argument to guide them through these unfamiliar reaches of Africa and their local foodways. And readers might be excused for puzzlement at the author’s comparisons—no matter how spot-on they might seem to a specialized readership of African historians—to otherwise unfamiliar ethnonyms of continental neighbors and their distinctive histories with food.

Rich’s project is ambitious, and, given the relative obscurity of Gabon in academic and popular knowledge, it labors under a perhaps unfair burden. He needs to tell the history of the colony while also stressing the centrality of food, and must relate broadly known economic history of global empires to unfamiliar cultural changes in Gabon. In his introduction Rich confesses that this “task is not easy” (p.xv). That he mostly succeeds is worth commending.

—J.D. La Fleur, College of William & Mary

Feast: Why Humans Share Food
Martin Jones
ix + 364 pp. Illustrations. $35.00 (cloth)

Drive-thrus and TV dinners are not the end of society! Martin Jones lays out his archaeologically based message of hope in Feast by showing that modern American eating habits are but an extension of uniquely human ways of taking sustenance—in particular, our need to ingest society along with our nutrients.

Borrowing from ethnographic conventions, each core chapter introduces its historical period with archaeologically based fictional vignettes that transport readers to a precisely situated eating event. We marvel at new kitchen architecture along with a traveler to the Euphrates Valley eleven thousand years ago and share ruminations on a lifetime with a widow in Denmark some two thousand years in the past. The opening narratives set the stage for the description and interpretation of the archaeological evidence that follows. If the fictions sometimes read uncomfortably and fancifully, the subsequent discussions thoroughly explain why most of the narrative details were chosen, based on both site-specific finds and more generalizable data on the era and region.

What is the relationship between the biological and social aspects of human eating, and how did it come to