language, history, film, religion, and fasting. Her forays into these realms, while for the most part informative, are above all entertaining. At times these asides generalize too broadly and even contain some mistakes: the section on Iranian film has factual errors, and the single page on a topic as massive as “Iranians and Islam” (pp.116–117) or the very few words on women, gender roles, and the veil (p.213) create so many generalizations that they invite dispute. But these are not serious problems, for the book above all is a subjective, warm, and humorous look at Iran from one Englishwoman’s point of view. Information on history and culture is filtered through the best tradition of British humor—1066 and all that British humor—

But these are not serious problems, for the book above all is a subjective, warm, and humorous look at Iran from one Englishwoman’s point of view. Information on history and culture is filtered through the best tradition of British humor—1066 and all that comes to mind, as does the good-humoredly sarcastic tone of British comedians such as Victoria Wood. Butcher’s quick cultural tours are truly funny, filled with her own loving reactions to Persian foibles as well as a clear fascination with the culture.

“[The Iranians] aren’t half full of themselves,” she is happy to report (p.8), and Alexander the Great is “Alexander the some-say Great” (p.11). Beginning the section on the incursion of Islam into Iran in 637 A.D., she comments: “Ah, well, the Arabs. Gosh, did they bring a lot of luggage with them” (p.12). Butcher is also quick to poke fun at herself as the Englishwoman who not only observes the culture but also has become a part of it. There are, in addition, touching and compassionate glimpses into the hard lives of frightened Iranian immigrants when they first arrive in London (“Every customer tells a story,” she notes on page 193).

Today it is perhaps no longer easy to offer fresh and humorous takes on the most famous culinary traditions: accounts of adventures in Italian, French, Indian, and Japanese cuisines command the market, every nuance explored in every possible tone. It is, after all, easy to travel to such countries, and access to ingredients and methods becomes simpler every day. But for many Westerners Iran is not easy to visit. Nor is Persian cuisine particularly well known in the West. Finally, humor and Iran are not two words one often puts in the same sentence, especially in the United States. Persia in Peckham demonstrates that Iran is open to funny, loving, and personal reflection, and that traditional Persian recipes can easily handle a lively overhaul with help from other cultures.

—Leyla Rouhi, Williams College

Kinship and Food in South East Asia
Edited by Monica Janowski and Fiona Kerlogue
Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2007
vii + 292 pp. Illustrations. $50.00 (paper)

In South East Asia, as elsewhere, food is nourishment, giver of pleasure, and topic of conversation. The contributors to this volume address themselves to its other, less visible role in the region: a medium through which kinship and social ties are constructed, cemented, and expressed.

Taken together, these essays argue for the expansion of kinship definitions beyond those based on biological or affinal ties. At first glance the inclusion in a single volume devoted to such diverse societies with distinct kinship structures appears problematic (seven authors focus on Austronesian-language-speaking groups in Malaysia and Indonesia, and one each on Northeastern Thais, the majority population of Vietnam, and the Inanwatan of Papua). One wonders on what basis, for instance, the matrilineal Minangkabau of central Sumatra (Indonesia) can usefully be compared with the patrilineal Viet. The answer is that these societies share a common cosmology, one marked by “a concern with the continued, and correct, channeling of life from one generation to the next, both between the living” and the dead (p.21). In all of the cases presented here life is channeled, at least in part, via feeding and/or the sharing of food.

All but two of the essays focus on rice-eating communities. Rice is so central to the diets of the Viet, the Isan of Northeastern Thailand, the Kelabit of Sarawak, and Malay/Indonesian-speaking societies that the terms for “eating” and “eating rice” are identical. For the Southern Lio of Flores, the residents of a Malay village on central Sumatra, and the Minangkabau of West Sumatra, rice is an important feature of life-cycle rituals and gift exchange. The same can be said for the focal starches of the Inanwatan of Papua (sago) and the residents of an East Indonesian village (embel, dried biscuits made from cassava).

The members of many of these communities believe rice to be possessed of a human-like spirit which, according to both the Viet and the Isan, resides inside the rice barn, where the family’s harvest is stored (pp.247, 270). One month after the rice has been harvested and placed in the barn, the Isan stage a ritual to thank the spirit and to bring good luck and contentment to the family (p.231). The Southern Lio also recognize the existence of a rice-goddess but, unlike the Isan, do not include her in agricultural rituals. This may express “the ambivalent relations between [the people] and [the goddess] as the embodiment of an important, but scarce, food crop” (p.208).
Rice and other core starches are also believed to be carriers of power, vitality, “life force.” The residents of Kerek, East Java, for instance, classify foods according to how much “life-giving essence” they hold; substances high on the scale make up the main ingredients in the seven-months’ pregnancy (and other) rituals (pp.26–27). A Kelabit’s place within longhouse and kin hierarchy depends on the strength of his or her adun (life force, human life), which is itself determined by success at rice-growing (p.109). By providing sago for their children, Inanwatan men contribute to the construction of their flesh; for this community the ingestion of rice and other “foreign” foods weakens one’s “bodily substance” (p.172). According to the Isan, sakitti (power or potency) is transferred, in the form of protective power or blessings, from those receiving ritual offerings of rice and other foods (monks) to those making the offerings (p.227).

The authors amply demonstrate that throughout the region food is used to construct, consolidate, symbolize, and even to restore kinship and community ties. In both central Flores and West Sumatra, ceremonies at which food and other gifts are exchanged between the families of a bride and groom mark the creation of affinal ties. In the central Sumatran village studied by Kerlogue the closest kin relations are between siblings, defined by the community as those who have sucked at the same breast. Mothers thus construct kin ties by breast-feeding, and also reinforce them by distributing a tonic, made with the umbilical cord of a new sibling, to its brothers and sisters. For the Kelabit of Sarawak the sharing of rice meals is the means by which anyone taken into the longhouse—adopted children nowadays but, in the past, slaves captured in raids on other longhouses—comes to be regarded as kin (p.99).

In South East Asia feeding ties one not only to living kin but to the deceased as well. In this case the usual direction of feeding is “inverted” as nourishment flows up the line of descent (p.18). In “Glutinous Rice, Kinship, and the Têt Festival in Vietnam,” Nguyên Xuân Hiên describes the sharing and exchange between living and deceased kin (via offerings at the ancestor temple), during Têt (Vietnamese lunar New Year), of rice alcohol and two types of glutinous rice cakes. In a similar way, Sasak Muslims on the island of Lombok commemorate and appease the spirits of the recently deceased (who, if they feel neglected, may return to their community in search of the living) via rice offerings (p.129). There is an element of reciprocity in these offerings; for instance, when Viet offer food to and burn joss sticks on their ancestors’ altar they ask for protection for the coming year (p.251).

It should be noted—and most of the authors do so explicitly—that gender plays an important role in the manipulation of ties of relatedness via food. In most of these societies women are the primary nurturers, preparers of food, and orchestrators of feeding rituals and ceremony.

The essays in Kinship and Food in South East Asia read unevenly—some are denser than others—but they are, across the board, so rich in ethnological detail that the effort is justified. A welcome and important addition to the scholarly literature on kinship, this volume will also be of interest to South East Asianists and to those keen to expand their knowledge of the place and uses of food in societies around the world.

—Robyn Eckhardt, Kuala Lumpur

Spices and Comfits: Collected Papers on Medieval Food
Johanna Maria van Winter
Blackawton, Totnes: Prospect Books, 2007
439 pp. + indices. $80.00 (cloth)

Professor Johanna Maria van Winter was a pioneer in research into food and culinary history. In the 1960s, when she first published in this field, the study of food was still in its infancy; it was only in 1961 that Fernand Braudel, in an issue of Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations, called for an enquête ouverte or open enquiry into what he called vie matérielle or material life—a vague title, he acknowledged, but an extraordinarily diverse one, taking not only an historical perspective but also including insights from geography, anthropology, sociology, economy, demography, folklore, linguistics, medicine, statistics, and yet others.

Van Winter’s particular interest was medieval food, cooking, and cookbooks. Coincidentally, the medieval era was also the focus of research for a number of scholars in other countries—Jean-Louis Flandrin in France, Constance Hieatt in Canada, Piero Camporesi in Italy—and, to a large extent, their research inaugurated the now-thriving discipline (or perhaps subdiscipline) of food history, with its own journals (such as Food & Foodways, Food & History, and, not least, Gastronomica) and a community of food scholars worldwide.

This book collects some twenty-eight papers published between 1971 and 2006, mostly in English but with a few written in French or German, covering not only food, cooking, and meals in the medieval and early modern periods but also health and medicine, kitchen utensils, table manners, and food preservation. Lucid, thorough, and...