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, sakitt (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 suckled 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,” Nguyễn Xuân Hiền 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 felt neglected, may return to their community in search of the living) via rice meals (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, Societies, 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
meticulously researched and documented, they are not only a model of scholarship but also a guide to methodology. Indeed, Professor van Winter emphasizes the need to delve into a wide range of sources, from culinary manuscripts to household accounts, from agricultural history to trade records, in order to find answers to the perennial question: what did they eat?

Though trained as an historian, Professor van Winter also demonstrates, as do many culinary historians, a practical bent. She notes that liquid salt, as represented by the Roman fish sauce, garum, or the fish sauces of Southeast Asia, helps keep the meat moist, whereas granulated salt extracts the juices. Having experimented with recipes from a sixteenth-century manuscript cookery book, she pronounces them delicious and offers a sample, with her own commentary, for readers to try. With Sauce Dorfpine, for example, she explains that the bone marrow should be added near the end of cooking so that the sourness of the sauce can develop fully.

Professor van Winter’s research concentrated on the Netherlands and northern Europe, so when she asks the question: “Were raw salads indeed served, and if so, at the beginning or elsewhere in the course of a meal?” she does not look for answers in Mediterranean writings. According to the medical theory of the time, salads were classified as cold and moist and not always conducive to good health. The first record she finds, for the Netherlands, is in the late sixteenth century, when a salad of lettuce and red cabbage was served at the end of a meal. This evidence might lead to a conclusion that salads were a late introduction to European tables. Yet salads were commonly eaten in southern France, Italy, and Spain in the fifteenth century, if not earlier. When le roi Réné was in residence at Aix-en-Provence, his kitchen received regular deliveries of lettuce and herbs, often specifically described as “pour faire salade.” The bishop of Avignon was also served salads in summer. The splendid Italian dinners whose menus are detailed in The Neapolitan Recipe Collection: Cuoco Napolitano (ed. Terence Scully, 2000) often began with insalata. Felix Platter, a student in Montpellier in the mid-sixteenth century, noted that salads were served at the start of the evening meal throughout the year. We should remember that European eating habits were probably just as diverse in the medieval period as they are now, and that it is idiosyncrasies such as these that make the study of food, cooking, and eating so fascinating. For instance, in her chapter on the consumption of dairy products in the Netherlands in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Professor van Winter points out that the Dutch and Flemish were distinguished by their regular use of butter in their cooking, while in other countries lard and oil were more typical.

What and how people ate in the medieval period was intimately linked to medical beliefs—at least for those who had the luxury of choice. Van Winter repeatedly warns of the limitations of the available evidence, which principally relates to the nobility, the clergy, and the wealthy. The general consensus among physicians that raw fruit was harmful, together with the paucity of information on apples, quinces, pears, plums, and cherries in the available recipe collections, leads her to the conclusion that “it is unlikely that these fruits were eaten raw earlier than the sixteenth century.” Of course, we have no idea whether the fruit grown at that time developed the same sweetness as fruits today, but it seems to me just as likely that people would value fresh fruits for their flavor and enjoy them straight from the tree during their brief season as an opportune snack.

This compilation of Professor van Winter’s writings on food in the medieval period represents a significant contribution to the scholarship on this subject, especially for its insights into the food and cooking of the Netherlands (the subject of ten chapters). One minor reproach is that as a compilation, it suffers from the fault of all such collections of disparate articles from a diversity of publications, in that the same information is often repeated from chapter to chapter.

—Barbara Santich, University of Adelaide