Mark Harvey, and Alan Warde rightly argue that simple, individualistic explanations of food trust that focus on consumers and their understandings of risk are inadequate. Instead, they pose the question of what promotes trust (and fosters distrust) in food. Based on survey data and institutional analysis in six European countries, they develop a sophisticated account not only of trust relating to food but also, more generally, of the very nature of trust.

Trust has diverse connotations depending on context; it carries different meanings in various languages, ranging from certainty, confidence, being safe, and feeling safe (pp.4–5). Although an extensive literature on food worries exists, Kjærnes, Harvey, and Warde correctly point out that most of the existing scholarly discourse has focused on risk perception and Ulrich Beck’s influential idea that we now live in a “risk society,” in which we experience rapid scientific, technological, and economic changes. Expertise is increasingly contested, and individuals have ever-increasing responsibility to decide to what extent they are willing to expose themselves and their families to various risks. These accounts view distrust as an individual and cognitive consumer phenomenon arising out of the uncertainties and fears in our unsafe and oftentimes frightening modern world.

By contrast, the authors of Trust in Food problematize the concept of the consumer and go beyond the typical issues relating to food safety by taking a broader approach and examining the institutions that support food consumption, provisioning, and regulation. Most important, they take trust and distrust not only as reflections of individual opinions but as relational concepts that emerge from individuals’ various attitudes toward food. These relationships range from close and local, such as with a neighborhood shopkeeper, to more distant ones, such as with government regulatory agencies or multinational supermarket chains. They involve a range of practices (e.g., cooking and eating) and roles (being a customer and a citizen) and are instantiated in different ways in different countries.

The empirical project at the core of the book triangulates a population survey with documentary analysis and qualitative interviews, thus allowing integration of data about how consumers view five “key food issues” (nutrition, quality, ethics, safety, and value for money) associated with food trust and its challenges with institutional-level data about the structures that produce and maintain this trust. Although the survey data are complex, they are likely to be of considerable interest to many: for instance, distrust, both in food and more generally, is high and widespread in Italy and Portugal, yet the Portuguese have greater trust in the safety of food and also make finer-grained distinctions about the safety of various types of food than do the Italians. Denmark and Norway evidence high degrees of trust in food for all of the factors measured, perhaps not surprising, given their generally high levels of societal trust and their political and cultural commonalities, yet the Danish have markedly lower confidence in take-away food than do the Norwegians. And although Germany and Great Britain both have had significant food crises as well as having similar, complex market structures, the British are fairly positive about institutions relating to food, while there is considerable skepticism about such institutions throughout Germany.

Thus Kjærnes, Harvey, and Warde conclude that institutional arrangements are central to the generation of trust (and to the fostering of distrust). They describe new forms of governance that will allow realignments between norms and expectations as well as reassurance for consumers and thereby foster the sorts of relationships that generate trust. Trust in Food is written in scholarly and sometimes dense prose, and at times it fails to explore adequately such factors as local and regional variations and gender-related aspects of food trust. Nevertheless, I recommend it highly to anyone interested in our attitudes to food or national differences in food beliefs.

— Rachel A. Ankeny, University of Adelaide

Kitchen Literacy: How We Lost Knowledge of Where Food Comes From and Why We Need to Get It Back
Ann Vileisis
332 pp. Illustrations. $25.95 (cloth)

Ann Vileisis’s Kitchen Literacy can be read as a companion to Michael Pollan’s influential The Omnivore’s Dilemma. In his book Pollan laments: “As a culture we seem to have arrived at a place where whatever native wisdom we may once have possessed about eating has been replaced by confusion and anxiety” (p.1). Pollan’s solution is “to go back to the very beginning, to follow the food chains that sustain us, all the way from the earth to the plate” (pp.5–6).

Kitchen Literacy begins with a similar rhetorical question: “How on earth did we get into the modern situation where we know so little about what we eat, yet regard it as entirely normal?” (p.4). Vileisis, an independent historian and the author of a history of America’s wetlands, takes a different approach than Pollan: instead of going back to the start of a biological chain, she begins with our country’s postcolonial history, chronicling what she calls, in one of
many striking coinages in her book, the story of our “lengthening food chain” (p.58).

Vileisis starts with the diary of Martha Ballard, a midwife who lived, as many Americans did in the 1790s, on a farm near a mill, with her own dairy, gardens, cattle, and sheep. “To most pre-industrial Americans the food chain was eminently tangible” (p.21), writes Vileisis.

Describing Martha gathering wood, making bread from her own flour, picking bugs from plants, milking cows and using their fat for tallow, she concludes that “the project of procuring food was not a sliver of experience squeezed in as quickly as possible but rather a dominant and all-encompassing focus for her and each member of her family” (p.28).

Vileisis charts the changes in industrial-age America that would increase the disassociation between eating and food production and make Martha’s world obsolete: the increase in shipping food by rail, the disappearance of wild game from markets, the rise of the canning and meatpacking industries, the prevalence of a “new domestic ideology” (p.43) that saw cooking as a job for servants, the reliance on “experts” in all matters culinary.

What held this new system together was a “covenant of ignorance” (p.171) that has remained in place, with few challenges, until the present day:

Food manufacturers did not want to be pestered by careful scrutiny of their ever-changing production methods…And housewives did not want to be bothered with knowing details; it was precisely the unknowing aspect of the emerging food system that reduced time in both shopping and cooking and also helped recast cooking as desirable work for women of all classes. (p.171)

Although Kitchen Literacy is heavily dependent upon a few standard food histories (Perfection Salad, Appetite for Change), Vileisis has a gift for synthesis and summary, and she has done some original research and interpretation: through a comparison of such unexpected objects as meat charts and food advertisements, she depicts a movement toward abstraction and mystification that also characterized the larger food culture. And in resurrecting Thomas De Voe’s little-known memoir, The Market Assistant, Vileisis has found a fascinating chronicler of America’s changing foodways in the mid-nineteenth century and, probably, America’s first Greenmarket advocate.

If there is a phantom presence in Kitchen Literacy, it is John and Karen Hess’s The Taste of America (first published in 1977). “Typically, the history of America’s remarkable food system has been recounted as a singularly progressive tale” (p.9), writes Vileisis. This generalization hardly applies to the Hesses’ work, a polemical chronicle based on original scholarship that tells a regressive story similar to Kitchen Literacy’s. The Hesses were the first to do what Vileisis now attempts: to tell the story of how industrialization led to the slow decline of “kitchen literacy.” The Hesses charted the decline mainly through cookbooks; Vileisis takes a wider approach. Although The Taste of America is cited once in the footnotes, the Hesses are conspicuously absent from a list of “authors and scholars whose works have informed Kitchen Literacy” (p.312). This omission might have to do with a difference in temperament as much as anything: the Hesses passed their verdicts like hanging judges and took a Nabokovian glee in deflating received ideas and established reputations; Vileisis, by contrast, is a measured and always empathetic writer.

Like E.D. Hirsch’s wildly popular Cultural Literacy, whose title this book is meant to echo, Kitchen Literacy has a practical and prescriptive bent. In her epilogue Vileisis offers some unassailable suggestions for achieving kitchen literacy: Shop at farmer’s markets. Get to know local producers directly. Join CSAs. Pay attention to government policies that affect food and agriculture. And, finally, start your own garden.

Bringing a handful of sage from her garden to her cutting board, Vileisis surprises a bunch of tiny spiders. After gently carrying them back to the garden, she concludes: “But having spiders in my kitchen reminded me that my foodshed is always part of a larger whole…At the other end of my food chain, wherever it may be—there are always spiders, worms, birds, rivers, and people” (p.245).

—John Broening, Denver, co

The Story of Tea: A Cultural History and Drinking Guide
Mary Lou Heiss and Robert J. Heiss
Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2007
vii + 417 pp. Photographs, maps. $24.95 (cloth)

Early on in The Story of Tea, Mary Lou and Bob Heiss, owners of Cooks Shop Here, a specialty-food store in Northampton, Massachusetts, write that they consider tea to be, above all, a Chinese drink. This statement explains their approach. Two-thirds of the book deals with the production, history, and cultures of tea in China and Japan. Readers who expect information about tea in general and about all of the various leaves used worldwide to revitalize or calm will, like me, initially be disappointed, as The Story of Tea