That the authors are passionate about tea goes without saying. They are excellent guides, leading readers through the tea gardens and production facilities of Asia and entertaining us with the history of this complex and fascinating beverage.

—Rachel Finn, Chicago, Il.

*Thomas Jefferson on Wine*

John Hailman

Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006

xvi + 457 pp. $38.00 (cloth)

John Hailman’s *Thomas Jefferson on Wine* is a fascinating exploration of the early days of the modern global wine trade, as experienced by one of the most significant figures in United States history. Many readers will know little about Jefferson’s pre-presidential ambassadorship to France, let alone the wine discoveries he made in that position. Indeed, only Jefferson scholars are likely to have considered his life apart from a few well-known historical events. Similarly, even wine aficionados are unlikely to know much about the quality and nature of wines of the late 1700s, or how they were produced, sold, stored, and consumed. Hailman, who has been a wine columnist and judge as well as a Jefferson devotee, masterfully intertwines these two subjects.

As a wine drinker by choice in a nation devoted to whiskey, beer, and cider, Jefferson worked hard to obtain his preferred drink and to persuade his friends of its merits. Jefferson kept copies of his letters to heads of state and to his wine-procuring agents, leaving a wealth of information concerning the world of wine two hundred years ago.

Jefferson’s pursuit of wine and a greater understanding of grape growing and winemaking make an unusual lens through which to see him as a more complete person than textbooks can show. The story of how Jefferson, even as president, “paid for…[his wine]…with u.s. Bank notes cut in half and mailed separately,” reveals an eccentric side not found in traditional portraits (p.268). Hailman makes clear that this book, more than thirty years in the making, “is offered especially to those who know a little about either wine or Jefferson, but would like to learn more about both in a relatively painless way” (p.ix).

Hailman provides a helpful overview of the state of wine technology in the 1700s and explains the difficulties of obtaining wine in the United States, including piracy, storms at sea, and thirsty boatmen who would sample the wares and then refill the barrels with river water. Hailman
is at his most illuminating when he quotes directly from Jefferson’s letters and papers, particularly the “Traveling Notes & Journal” from his trip through southern France and Italy two years before the storming of the Bastille. Jefferson remarked upon the vast differences between life in Paris and the countryside. In the country, towns lacked glass windows, people dressed in rags, and wine was consumed only on Sundays. Piquette, a low-alcohol drink made from the pomace remaining after grapes are pressed, was the drink for the rest of the week (p.111).

Jefferson took it upon himself to classify the growths of Bordeaux in 1788, years before the official classification of 1855, agreeing entirely with the latter classification regarding the four first-quality producers: Chateau Margau (Margaux), La Tour de Ségur (Latour), Hautbrion (Haut Brion), and de La Fite (Lafite) (p.116). Jefferson bought a great deal of wine directly from the producers during his travels and thereafter. Hailman includes Jefferson’s inventories of his Paris cellar and various other cellars for our vicarious enjoyment.

In Thomas Jefferson on Wine, Hailman has produced an admirable work portraying Jefferson in vivid complexity while also illuminating the joys and frustrations of the eighteenth-century wine lover.

—Matthew Reid, Calistoga, CA

Bookends

Food
Edited by John Knechtel
Cambridge, Ma: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Alphabet City Media, Inc., 2007
320 pp. Illustrations. $15.95 (cloth)

Fuel, water, air, trash, and food are some of the subjects John Knechtel has grappled with as editor of Alphabet City Media, an imprint of the MIT Press. In each volume of the series, “writers and artists address a single theme from many perspectives, revealing its processes and possibilities.” This approach helps account for the wildly eclectic, freewheeling nature of the writings in Food that range from the diet of Soviet gastronauts to nocturnal foraging of public (fallen) fruit in Silver Lake, Los Angeles.

Other ideas explored in the book are the construction of a global seed vault, the future of street food, comparative carbon footprints for apples and oranges, and a skyscraper for living and farming. Additionally, a number of photographic essays are featured that both delight and intrigue.

Lara Vapnyar’s elegant, understated language in this slim volume reveals essential truths much more viscerally than would a longer work with more elaborate descriptions. Each of the six stories—largely tales of miscommunication and unfulfilled needs and desires—revolves around food and its transformative power. In the title story, “A Bunch of Broccoli on the Third Shelf,” the vegetable, crisp and fresh from the market, initially symbolizes Russian émigré Nina’s desire for domestic normalcy and assimilation into the American way of life, yet Nina never manages to find the time to cook the broccoli, and her marriage ultimately collapses. However, by the story’s end the broccoli—now withered and old—paradoxically holds the promise of a new life, and of love.

—Alexandra Leaf, New York, NY

Broccoli and Other Tales of Food and Love
Lara Vapnyar
148 pp. $20.00 (cloth)

Sian Bonnell’s Scenic Cookery depicts landscapes rendered in mashed potatoes, peas, and corned beef, while Dean Baldwin’s Attempt at an Inventory presents nearly two thousand small-format color photos of the food and drink he has consumed over time.

And if a book can be judged by its cover, Food has a lot to tell us. The mottled warm red and beige cover of the small, hardbound volume, the reader later learns, features a detail of one of the images from Christine d’Onofrio’s Candy Coated, a series of photographs depicting partially consumed Smarties (European M&Ms). If you’ve ever sucked on an M&M for a few minutes and then looked at it, you’ll know just what I’m describing.

If the book’s cover is clever and provocative, the endpapers of the volume are even smarter: they feature the two-sided honeycomb paper/tin foil wrap used to keep food hot for take-out. Are these papers perhaps serving up the ideas contained within, keeping them warm before consumption? Like d’Onofrio’s disintegrating Smarties, the heat paper, too, has suffered atmospheric effects and is stained with yellow streaks.

Giving equal weight to text and image, Food does live up to its mission of serving forth fare that causes us to rethink what we know about the world. Food, in fact, reminds us that we are not only what we eat but also what we read.

—Alexandra Leaf, New York, NY