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 end-papers 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

**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 gastronomists 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.

—Matthew Reid, Calistoga, CA
In Vapnyar’s hands the simplest foods can lead to revelation, as in “Borscht,” where a bowl of homemade soup enables Sergey to discern beauty in Alla’s face, which previously had seemed to him unremarkable. Although the stories take as their subject the Russian and East European émigré experience in the United States, they are so deeply felt that their exploration of homesickness, nostalgia, and essential loneliness becomes universal. Even those characters who do assimilate experience emptiness in the loss of their longing.

What makes the stories especially rich is the glimpse they offer into the daily life of the former Soviet Union, with its food deficits, petty humiliations, and institutional control. In this regard “Puffed Rice and Meatballs” should be required reading for anyone who wants to understand the Soviet mindset and how it marked generations of people—quite literally, with the number of one’s place in a food queue written on the hand to deter line-jumpers. But if food can be associated with humiliation and shame, Vapnyar shows how it can also serve as a force that unites families, for better or worse. In “Olivier Salad,” the ubiquitous potato salad of the Soviet era becomes a metaphor for community, a group of people who, by slicing potatoes (“Slice! Don’t chop!”), share not only labor but also the burdens and joys of their lives.

The book concludes with a brief “Roundup of Recipes.” This addendum was evidently intended to increase the book’s appeal to a foodie audience, but it doesn’t enhance the volume. On the contrary, Vapnyar’s beautifully crafted stories give way to recipes that are written in a very different voice, one that is playful and intimate but not controlled; though likeable, it resembles that of a harried housewife who doesn’t have time to cook, and who doesn’t especially like to. For those uninitiated into the secrets of a successful Olivier Salad, none of the three offhand versions presented here will yield particularly interesting results. For that you’d need either a traditional, labor-intensive recipe, or—as Vapnyar’s stories make so clear—another essential ingredient: nostalgia for the past, which can be assuaged by the simple act of preparing food.

—Darra Goldstein, Williams College

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Marshmallow Fluff | Katie Liesener

Food on Film: A Star is Born | Steve Zimmerman

On the Trail of Tilleul | Kelly Gibson

Andy Warhol’s Production Kitchen | Elizabeth Athens

The Contraceptive Café | Dawn Starin

The Macaron and Madame Blanchez | Cindy Meyers

Making Chipas in Paraguay | Sanra Ritten