successful, it might, as Freedman says, “have substantially interfered with the spice trade.” We learn that the “Grain Coast” (the coast of Liberia and Sierra Leone) was named for grains of paradise, one of the forgotten spices of West Africa. From time to time, throughout the book, well-chosen keynote quotations from medieval sources are set apart from the text, and they make lively reading.

Of course, Freedman uses some sources indirectly; how could it be otherwise? This produces a few imprecisions. The ancient navigator “Endossus” (p.183) who may or may not have circumnavigated Africa is Eudoxus of Cyzicus; he intended to exchange Spanish dancing girls for Indian spices, with what success is not known. “Italian sorghum” (p.196) is somebody’s mistranslation; foxtail millet (Setaria Italica) is intended. Columbus hoped he had found myrobalans but in fact found “American plums,” as Freedman calls them (p.210); more accurately, these were Spondias purpurea, mombins or hog plums. Forget such minutiae: this reader is truly grateful to Freedman for mentioning (and misspelling) Walter of Bibbesworth, medieval author of an English-French glossary, and then turning to a discussion of mawmeny, a medieval European delicacy with an Arabic name. Thanks to this lucky juxtaposition, I suddenly saw the solution to a puzzle in Walter’s text (which I am currently translating). Walter’s maumerie is not an early form of Malmsey, as the Anglo-Norman Dictionary implausibly suggests; it’s a misspelling of mawmeny.

Freedman is right to doubt whether the cultural exchanges of the Crusade period were enough to turn medieval Europe into a spice-loving society: spices were already at the heart of European cuisine long before, in Roman times, though there must have been periods after Rome fell when the supply of eastern aromatics temporarily failed. He is also right that the theory of the four humors led directly to steady demand for spices in medicine, and his guide to humoral theory (pp.51–53) is really handy; as to its effect on our vocabulary, he might have added that this is the reason why we call peppers “hot.” “Spices were extravagant luxuries yet good for you, a combination that no food now duplicates,” he argues; “there is no modern equivalent to spices in their medieval sense as luxuriously healthful” (p.60). Any reader likes a challenge of that kind, and some will come up with possible refutations: walnut oil? fresh apple juice? is “organic” the new spice? But I believe Freedman is right, and he has shown us the way to the mysterious and exotic place where spices met the European imagination.

—Andrew Dalby, Saint-Coutant, France

Cooking and Dining in Medieval England
Peter Brears
Totnes: Prospect Books, 2008
557 pp. Illustrations. £30 (boards)

For those without a prior interest in the cooking and dining practices of medieval England, and whose notions of these subjects may have been casually acquired from movies, Peter Brears’s book will prove a source of enlightenment and delight. It is a work of great erudition that examines all aspects of domestic administration in the production and service of food in, for the most part, large households, in which a hierarchy of officials regulated and audited everything from collecting rents, acquisition and release of ingredients and fuel, maintaining the security of storage areas, and cooking in all its separate departments, through to the elaborate etiquette for service at table.

Using archaeological and architectural sources to define the disposition of various storage and work spaces, Brears sheds much light on the ergonomics of producing food on a large scale with maximum efficiency. What also emerges is that the interpretation of archaeological remains can often be enhanced by a knowledge of cooking practices. The workings of the dairy, brewhouse, bakehouse, pastry, and boiling house are described in successive chapters, and a selection of recipes is given for each. Then follow accounts of the kitchen, kitchen furniture and equipment, and potage utensils, with separate chapters on the products of the main kitchen organized by preparation method—pottages, leaches, roasting, and frying. It becomes clear that the level of sophistication in cooking could be very great. Well over two hundred and fifty modernized recipes are included, representative of some fifteen hundred late-fourteenth- and fifteenth-century originals. The most basic procedures went unrecorded, with the implication that those written down were for dishes not prepared frequently enough to be remembered in detail. To make good this deficiency the author draws on a continuing English cooking tradition and his extensive experience as a “reconstruction cook.” Those trying the recipes reproduced will find themselves most pleasurably rewarded.

The most basic item of the medieval diet was undoubtedly bread, used also for trenchers. In the small domestic environment baking was done over the fire on a flat bakestone, or in an improvised oven inside a pot around and over which embers could be heaped. By contrast, the bakehouses of large houses had stone or brick ovens. In the medieval period pastry was essentially disposable cookware and not intended for consumption. Pre-prepared crusts
were filled for baking as required for the table. Many of the pastries were recognizably similar to the tarts and flans of today, albeit using what we might consider unusual combinations of ingredients. Others were elaborately constructed. Flampoints were ornamented with pointed pieces of pastry, but most impressive of all was the castllete, comprising a round keep with four flanking round towers all being battlemented. Each tower had a separate filling, and the whole construction was served flambé at great feasts.

Potages were no more than dishes cooked in a single pot, from the simplest cereal gruels to the richest stews; they make up half the total number of recipes in the book. Meat used for a potage might have been prepared by roasting, frying, or parboiling. Again, this was a device for facilitating its quick conversion into a range of different dishes by simmering in different stocks, with much attention being given to their consistency, texture, and color. Roasting was too time-consuming to be practiced in small households, but frying could produce food rapidly, and with little fuel consumption.

Wine, wafers, and sweetmeats were served at the end of a meal. In the greatest households, where the feast was conducted as an expression of wealth, power, and status, the ostentatious culmination was the exhibition of subtleties. These were table sculptures on a particular allegorical or symbolic theme produced in the confectionery. Initially made from edible materials—sugar, marchpane, pastry—they came to be constructed from more durable ones, such as wax, paper, tinfoil, or wood. One cannot fail to be impressed by the skill and ingenuity of the medieval cook, and by the variety and sophistication of what was produced in facilities which today would be considered limited.

The volume’s illustrations are either original drawings by the author or his redrawings from various sources. Although they are very informative, few are referred to in the text. For the most part they appear near where they are relevant, but it would have been helpful to have drawn attention to them. The accounts of dining in chamber, and of great feasts, both include cartoon-strip representations that are especially helpful in succinctly conveying the elaborate ceremonial involved.

It is a matter of regret that this fine book is marred by inconsistencies, errors, and omissions in the end material—notes, bibliography, and indices. For instance, the bibliography contains lapses in alphabetization and is incomplete, while the generally useful index of recipes bizarrely lists a recipe for vegetable pottage under “Beef.” The usefulness of the general index depends on readers already knowing the class of subject they are looking for; thus, “pimps” and “shides” are to be found only under “Fuel.” Although individually trivial, the errors are cumulatively unacceptable and should have been eliminated by an attentive editor.

―Michael Hobbs, London

La noblesse à table: Des ducs de Bourgogne aux rois des Belges/The Dining Nobility: From the Burgundian Dukes to the Belgian Royalty
Edited by Paul Janssens and Siger Zeischka
266 pp. Illustrations. $39.95 (paper)

This book, the second of three volumes in the Social & Cultural Food Studies (FOST) series devoted to a study of luxury cuisine and drink of the country that is now Belgium, is the only one at least partially written in English. The two other are in Dutch, the first being focused on aristocratic food, meal organization, domestic help, and associated social customs in nineteenth- and twentieth-century chateaux in Belgium; and the third focusing on the history of dessert and the use of sugar. Although written in English and French, the predominant native language of the authors is Dutch. This is an important point, as the language at times gets in the way of clarity. The linguistic disparity among the articles suggests the lack of a native-speaking editor for a few of the English portions. Even the title exhibits some sign of this problem: à table does not really translate to “dining” as an adjective. More comprehensible titles would be “Nobility at Table” or “Nobility at the Dinner Table.”

The title also leads one to think that the book will be a history of dining in Belgium from the fifteenth century to the present day. However, after the initial two commendable essays in the first section (Lilliane Plouvier’s “Spécialités ‘Bourguignonnes’ dans les Pays-Bas méridionaux [xve siècle]” and Kenneth Albala’s “Ludovicus Nonnus and the Elegance of Fish”) and Plouvier’s opening essay on the Burgundian court in the second, the remainder concern themselves with nineteenth and early-twentieth century Belgium. This is logical, since the book relies heavily on a collection of over six thousand menus belonging to Didier de Meester de Betzenbroeck as the source for many illustrations and comments about aristocratic cuisine. Since individual menus for diners date from the mid-nineteenth century, they inevitably define the