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 castlette, 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 more 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, marzipan, 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 potage 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 other two 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
chronological focus of this book. Unfortunately, this focus leads to a huge gap, from the mid-seventeenth century to the nineteenth, when many culinary changes occurred along with changes in vessels and flatware. It is hard to feel that the subtitle “from the Burgundian Dukes to the Belgian Royalty” is justified, considering this gap of almost two hundred important years.

Organized into a preface and two parts, “Dishes and Wines” and “The Organization of Festivities and the Selection of Guests,” Dining Nobility has thirteen chapters by eleven authors. Following a brief preface, Chapter 1 is, in effect, a second preface by the editors, who give a synoptic preview of coming attractions and offer analytical comments to define the volume’s themes of gastronomy and conviviality.

Sophie Onghena, the author of the first volume on desserts, contributes an essay on exoticism in nineteenth-century dessert culture, which is one of the most interesting for those not primarily interested in Belgian history. Although the author focuses on the Belgian upper classes, she does so with a much broader European brush, touching on the enthusiasm for exotic travel, architecture, and imported foods encountered elsewhere.

The use of the collection menus is responsible for much information, some repetitive, about the Belgian royalty and their meals at public functions, hunting, and elsewhere, including their participation as guests. An analysis of how much these menus differed from their counterparts in other European countries and, in fact, from important honorary American functions would be useful and would help the authors better define specifically Belgian characteristics while giving the work a broader context. While the menus make wonderful illustrations and supply us with some information on the wines and foods served, there is no attempt to compare them with those in other collections, such as the Buttolph collection at the New York Public Library, which has over twenty-five thousand examples from the same period.

For culinary historians, these essays provide some interesting nuggets, especially for those who read more than menu French, though most will not need to revisit the change to service à la russe. This volume should be the change to service à la russe. This volume should be

The adventures of plant hunter Livio Dalla Ragione in the abandoned farmsteads of Umbria and Tuscany have been reported in the Italian media for well over a decade and outside of Italy have come even to the notice of the American magazine *The New Yorker*. In 1997 Livio and his daughter (and fellow explorer) Isabella were able to tell their own story in *Arboreale Archeologia: diario di due cercatori di piante*. But in a nation with many centuries of comic tradition, it was all too easy for Italian journalists to caricature their pastime and the almost apologetic vocabulary of the book’s introduction as *una bizzarreria rustica*, rather than recognizing their work as a valid, and useful, offering.

Livio’s and Isabella’s hobby of plant-hunting (the book’s English subtitle better describes it as “fruit exploring”) is more common and widely pursued than the urban public might believe. Committed individuals contribute to our fruit patrimony by searching out, identifying, and preserving our many varieties of fruit, both greater and lesser, from certain oblivion. Livio Dalla Ragione discovered that in Italy, as in the United States, there is no governmental repository with encyclopedic collections of the traditional apple and other fruit varieties of the countryside. Rather, the countryside itself is the repository, and as it degrades, so too does the collection. By comparison, the admirable French system of regional conservatories of traditional fruits and useful plants endeavors, with varying degrees of effectiveness, to preserve both the indigenous varieties and their folk uses in cuisine, husbandry, and industry.

Livio succumbed to the cult of fruit two decades after World War II when he purchased a ruined church in the area of Umbria bordering Tuscany. San Lorenzo in Lerchi was a hillside property, with many grapevines planted in *cultura promiscua*, that ancient art of training vines up fruit trees that allowed wheat to be grown between the rows. Livio’s trees were, for the most part, dead, but he wanted to restore the plantation—and the original varieties. This project required searching other near-abandoned sites, which by the early 1960s were common in Umbria.

And so an arboreal archaeologist was born. Livio would inquire of any sympathetic villager, Where are the old fruit trees? Abandoned monasteries were prime sources, but

—Sarah Coffin, Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, NY