strength of his historical narrative itself confirms that soul holds as much fascination for him as it does for, say, Peter Guralnick. And yet, whereas Guralnick’s fascination with soul music leads him to lament its all-too-brief span, and to treat it as a kind of cultural butterfly too beautiful to last long, Opie’s fascination with soul food leads him, by way of contrast, to push it backward and drag it forward chronologically, and to suggest that it grew out of “the associated foodways of people of African descent over hundreds of years (p.xii). Indeed, Hogs and Hominy argues that what came to call itself soul food following the Great Migration was only an especially explicit and exuberant manifestation of a tradition of soulful cooking that, always in flux, stretches back to preslavery West Africa even as it continues to evolve and flourish today.

Questions of nomenclature, of Hogs and Hominy’s sense of historical responsibility, do perhaps arise here. Early on the work announces that it will demonstrate that “the concept of soul in African American foodways… appeared long before the name ‘soul food’ was coined” (p.xi), but Opie never quite delivers on this tantalizing promise. Too little of his history, I think, is devoted to the period before 1900, and the book’s reliance on Alex Haley and Olaudah Equiano’s Interesting Narrative (which Vincent Carretta has shown is no more reliable than Roots) seems an unpromising basis from which to explore diverse West African traditions. The historical nuance that Opie brings to his exploration of African American foodways after 1900 can seem a little lacking in these early pages; here, Opie can be a bit quick to speak of a single African identity and is sometimes prone to view Africa’s present as a window on its past.

Despite these misgivings, few would challenge the fundamental tradition that Opie is proposing here. Academic research by Karen Hess, Jon Edward Philips, and Ronald Segal, cookbooks by Verta Mae Gro venor and Jessica Harris, and literary works such as Ntozake Shange’s If I Can Cook / You Know God Can, have all long since illuminated the many culinary echoes that one can find among all the farflung communities of the African Diaspora. This literature, indeed, has laid a foundation onto which Judith A. Carney and Psyche Williams-Forson, among other younger scholars, have been able to build their brilliant case studies. And in many ways Hogs and Hominy can be thought of as a useful gateway to these studies, a good first port of call for any student or general reader who is becoming interested in African American cooking and who wants to find out more about its full diasporic history. Innovative in its combination of historical and oral materials, informative in the diasporic connections it develops, Hogs and Hominy certainly does a good job of introducing such readers to a particularly vibrant and challenging area within the field of food studies. Its second half might be far stronger than its first, but Hogs and Hominy provides a definitive history of the grand social forces and unforgettable personalities that have revolutionized African American cooking since the twilight of the Jim Crow system.

—Andrew Warnes, University of Leeds

Kitchenspace: Women, Fiestas, and Everyday Life in Central Mexico
Maria Elisa Christie
Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008
xxi + 328 pp. Illustrations. $50.00 (cloth)

Kitchenspace is an evocative read that brought back to me many similar experiences I have had in Central Mexico over the years. The author, Maria Elisa Christie, conducted her research in three communities, all semi-urban villages typical of the region where most of the Mexican population lives. She describes the villages’ characteristic histories, focusing on specific women as they cook for local fiestas and their families’ daily meals. The title, Kitchenspace, refers to the indoor kitchen and the outdoor space where much of the food preparation, cooking, and eating is done, including space for growing herbs and edible plants and raising pigs, turkeys, or a few chickens. The book’s subtitle, “Women, Fiestas and Everyday Life in Central Mexico,” more precisely defines its subject. Christie was accepted into the Mexican woman’s world, and she shares a vision of life focused around the preparation of food and its changing role in Mexican society. Christie’s writing skills are impressive, but this remains first and foremost a thesis, making for an engaging but disjointed narrative.

The first part of the book explores aspects of Catholic folk celebrations in the communities. In Xochimilco, a village on the outskirts of Mexico City famous for the last remnants of the vast chinampas—floating gardens surrounding the ancient Aztec capitol of Tenachtitlán—Christie totally immerses the reader in descriptions of the yearlong celebrations surrounding El Niñopa (“Child of the Place”), a hand-carved wooden image of the baby Jesus that for centuries has been venerated and treated as a live child, receiving gifts of clothes and toys. This practice grew out of the traditions encompassing the child-being of the ancient Aztec god of war and protector of mothers. After describing several other festivals in Xochimilco, the author turns to the
Palm Sunday and Day of the Holy Cross fiestas of Ocotepec in the nearby state of Morelos. She then turns to largely mestizo Tetecala, which has little to do with the more indigenous traditions of the other two communities. Christie offers glimpses into a quinceañera, a fiesta marking a young girl’s entry into womanhood on her fifteenth birthday that is often a more elaborate ceremony than a wedding. She also describes an elotada, a family celebration of the corn harvest.

The second section of the book focuses on private conversations in the intimate kitchen spaces of women from these three villages. Christie’s interviews demonstrate that the kitchen remains their “center of cultural reproduction and at the heart of family and community relations” (p.153), but they also make clear the women’s dilemma: all bemoan the passing of some of their traditions and methods of cooking even as they praise such laborsaving devices as the blender.

Despite the author’s close observation of the foods of this region, I found several basic errors, especially regarding mole. Christie writes, for instance, that mole is believed to have originated in a convent in Puebla. Not so. Moles are of pre-Hispanic origin. Only the famous mole poblano can be traced back to the Puebla convent. Such errors may partly be explained by the fact that her extensive bibliography contains only a few references that have to do with actual cooking.

Christie, a gender equity specialist at Virginia Tech’s Office of International Research, Education, and Development, began researching this book at the beginning of the new century, a century that will exacerbate the split role of women in the Mexican village kitchens. It is her final chapter, “Food for Thought,” that I found most poignant and revealing, thanks to her strong personal voice. She knows that while she has connected with these families, especially the women, she can walk away and not share their bittersweet emotional lives, lives in which “everyone counts on you to make things right in the kitchen, no matter how things are outside or how you feel inside...Everybody says that it is important to be happy in the kitchen—regardless of whether or not you want to be there—because a cook must prepare her food with love for it to taste good and nourish and satisfy the people who eat at her table” (p.265).

For anyone interested in the role women play in the panorama of present-day Mexican village life, this book is well worth reading, for Christie observes and listens with her heart as well as with her eyes and ears.

—Marilyn L. Tausend, Culinary Adventures, Inc.

Bittersweet: Lessons from My Mother’s Kitchen
Matt McAllester
New York: The Dial Press, 2009
216 pp. Illustrations. $25.00 (cloth)

“If you need to keep the book open, you’re not really cooking,” Matt McAllester’s mother, Ann, admonishes him on the first page of his affecting new memoir, Bittersweet (p.1). Her tragic descent into madness and alcoholism and McAllester’s resuscitation of her memory through cooking her recipes are bookended by Ann’s culinary mentor Elizabeth David, who serves as a guide to portals he had forced himself to forget. Eventually McAllester’s uninhibited and fiercely loving mother battles back to some semblance of mental health toward the end of her life, gaining a brief rapprochement with her children.

In the memoir genre, writers such as Claudia Roden have written of the quest to “rejoice in our food and summon the ghosts of the past.” Loss lends itself to grasping at the concreteness of small details that we tend to ground ourselves in to cope with an unbearable grief. While moving through the numbness of sorrow over the death of a loved one we sit at a table with those who remain, pushing around grains of salt or sugar. At his best McAllester counts these grains for us, naming them and telling us which mattered, and deftly guiding us through the aromas and flavors of his mother’s kitchen, sensations inextricably linked to the time when his family was “whole and happy” (p.20). Some of this reminiscing is exquisitely rendered: watching TV in pajamas with his sister while anticipating their “surprise supper,” a whimsical Sunday night riff on leftovers that will feature French fries carved into the shape of the first letter of each family member’s name. While Bittersweet does not fall into the unfortunate genre of “My Mother’s Death,” McAllester’s prose at times can be flat: favorite restaurants serve up “an incredibly great time over food and wine” (p.97).

But his chronicling of his mother’s demise is riveting. It comes late, and we understand in a way that wasn’t as urgent, visceral, or revealing earlier in the book why he exiled himself to war zones brimming with others’ heartbreaks and the exhilaration of danger as a way to anaesthetize himself against her unraveling. McAllester realizes that she had to die before he could initiate this parsing of her life, “her old identity melting away like the chunks of chocolate she was heating in a mixing bowl that was sitting in a pan of boiled water” (p.168). After her death McAllester, a war correspondent, abandons his showy kitchen displays in pursuit of learning to cook with love as she did, to “feeding people rather than dazzling them” (p.62).