Palm Sunday and Day of the Holy Cross fiestas of Ocotepelo 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 quinceaeñera, 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. Mole 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).
McAllester admits that his efforts have not yielded understanding but that in accepting her death he must now make his own feasts, and life, with the wife with whom he is trying to start a family, and not just vainly strive for a happy, snow-globe past. “Meals are a source of life, not an echo of death” (p.165), he notes.

Elizabeth David said of her good friend Norman Douglas’s writing that whoever has helped us to a larger understanding is entitled to our gratitude for all time. Certainly McAllester’s mother deserves this tribute that he has paid to her in Bittersweet.

—Doreen Schmid, Napa, CA

Pacific Pinot Noir: A Comprehensive Winery Guide for Consumers and Connoisseurs
John Winthrop Haeger
Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008
xli + 454 pp. $21.95 (paper)

John Winthrop Haeger’s Pacific Pinot Noir will prove useful, informative, and entertaining to anyone who enjoys pinot noir wines—from the occasional consumer to grape growers and winemakers. This book is an updated and in some ways expanded version of Haeger’s earlier North American Pinot Noir (University of California Press, 2004).

The stunning growth in pinot noir production since the movie Sideways brought the variety widespread acclaim has led to major upheavals, most notably in the rise of numerous new, much lauded producers. In response, Haeger has tripled the number of producers profiled in this edition. He has also changed his criteria for inclusion. As he explains in “About This Book,” he selected the producers for North American Pinot Noir on largely subjective grounds, opting for producers who were pioneers or had a proven history with the variety. For Pacific Pinot Noir Haeger compiled lists from restaurants and retailers “with very serious and intelligent wine programs” (p.xiv) and other sources, ultimately selecting those producers who featured on at least three of the thirty-odd collected lists. Haeger admits that this methodology is imperfect but believes that “it is biased in favor of qualitative superiority adjusted for price performance, which seems a reasonable outcome” (p.xv). Intriguingly, his own preferences did not factor into the inclusion decisions, though he indicates his favorite producers with an icon.

With three times as many producers to cover, Haeger has less room to discuss the history of pinot noir, the clones and selections used today, the regions where the grape variety thrives, barrel selections, and the like. He argues fairly that such information is little changed since 2004 and refers interested readers to his earlier book. Nevertheless, Haeger’s skill as a writer allows him to include a tremendous amount of information on these subjects in the first brief sections, “About This Book” and the introduction, which contain sufficient technical information to satisfy most readers.

The introduction is also a wonderfully thoughtful essay on the history and current state of pinot noir production and its future, framed largely on the question of whether the Sideways-induced pinot boom is sustainable, and what it will mean for producers and consumers if it is.

Haeger is quite good on winemaking. Much of the introduction focuses on pinot noir styles and the winemaking decisions behind them, such as the maximum fermentation temperature allowed, whether to add cultured yeast, and when to press the wine off the skins (p.xxxvi). Here he also elaborates on the “consensus protocol” for pinot noir winemaking. By clearly explaining how pinot noir is typically produced, Haeger frees himself to discuss only how producers diverge from the consensus protocol in each profile. His clear descriptions are sufficiently detailed to satisfy winemakers; lay readers, too, will easily understand them, especially with the help of the comprehensive glossary.

The core of the book consists of thorough and descriptive profiles of pinot noir producers. Each entry provides an overview of the producer and describes grape sources and stylistic decisions. The “Wines and Winemaking Notes” section is technical but clear. Winemakers and serious wine geeks will delight in the candidness with which most of the producers discuss their winemaking. Rather than relying on clichés such as “wine is made in the vineyard,” the producers provide detailed information on, for example, the strains of yeast they use, how they select barrels for blends, and the criteria on which they base their picking decisions. Only a few producers decline comment, as when Merry Edwards states that “some of my winemaking techniques are proprietary and not up for discussion” (p.262). Yet even Edwards is happy to address acid adjustment for overripe grapes. For the winemaking professional, this information is invaluable.

The book has inspired energetic conversations among winemakers wishing to learn more about each other’s techniques.

Quibbles with the book are minor and have to do with the inevitably ephemeral nature of its subject. Most of the wines discussed are already gone from the market. The discussion of vintages, ranging from 1999 to 2006, is largely irrelevant to a new buyer. The roster of pinot noir producers