Ginor’s philosophical ambivalence about the ethics of foie gras production and the boredom of municipal government meetings. I can only surmise that the other players I haven’t met are rendered with similar accuracy.

Although it is difficult to say, given my proclivity to eat meat and the rarified food world I inhabit, I imagine that Caro’s effective application of the old journalistic saw that it is better to show than to tell means that people on both sides of the foie gras issue will take what they want from this book. Because the focus of the book is the Chicago ban, which is repealed in the end, and because Caro eats enough foie gras while conducting his research to spike his cholesterol sixty points, it is easy to conclude that he is not opposed to foie gras production or consumption, at least as he has witnessed it. But that does not mean he consumes without guilt or ambivalence. Caro concludes his lengthy acknowledgments by thanking the “billions of animals that feed most of us. Without them, the world food system wouldn’t exist in its current form. How much this is a positive or negative thing, I leave to you” (p.335).

Another talented writer with a different predisposition could no doubt use the same evidence to write a very different book. Jonathan Safran Foer’s Eating Animals comes to mind. But Caro’s book is not an ethical tract; rather it is a journalist account of a set of events that have ethical ramifications. It should be required reading for American gourmets and animal rights activists alike.

—Mitchell Davis, James Beard Foundation

Annals of the Caliphs’ Kitchens: Ibn Sayyar al-Warraq’s Tenth-Century Baghdadi Cookbook
English translation with Introduction and Glossary by Nawal Nasrallah
Leiden, Neth. and Boston: Brill, 2007
xii + 876 pp. Illustrations. $195.00 (cloth)
(Brill Series in Islamic History and Civilization, 70)

Although medieval Baghdad was a place of great diversity and rich cultural production, few Western nonspecialists would be able to give specific examples of the actual contents of this heritage. Nawal Nasrallah’s impressive translation of the tenth-century Baghdadi cookbook by Ibn-Sayyar al-Warraq provides a valuable resource for understanding medieval Baghdadi culture through culinary tradition.

Even a cursory glance at the volume shows that “culinary tradition” has a vast definition in the context of medieval Baghdad. In addition to the more familiar territory of recipes and ingredients, food for the medieval consumer automatically suggested medicine, philosophy, and art. Nasrallah’s translation, aided by Brill’s first-rate presentation, shows how these different components are connected and helps the reader see the diverse contextual elements that would have gone into the creation of a cookbook in the tenth century in Baghdad. In her introduction Nasrallah explains the manuscript culture of the text as well as the sources and legacy of Ibn al-Warraq. She then contextualizes the concept of food culture in medieval Baghdad and offers the reader key points for understanding Abbasid Baghdadi cuisine. She next outlines a crucial concept related to food in the Middle Ages: the humors that govern man’s health and temperament, and the remedying properties of food for balancing and adjusting humoral problems. After this helpful contextual information Nasrallah presents her translation of Ibn-Warraq’s text.

The translation is elegant and accessible. Where deemed relevant, the original Arabic terminology is included, making the text doubly interesting for those who know Arabic and who might wish to double-check or enrich their food lexicon. Footnotes are used carefully to clarify doubts related to the manuscript and to give further information on ingredients, medical beliefs, or cultural practices. The actual recipes take up pages 65 to 520, and like all good cookbooks, invite the reader either to peruse at random or to study specifics. These recipes also showcase the characteristic medieval sensitivity to intertextuality: many are taken from other oral or written sources (and credited), emphasizing the range of recipe ideas available to Al-Warraq.

Of special interest is the fact that, with some adjustments, many of the recipes are perfectly feasible for today’s Western kitchen. If some ingredients or recipes such as wild ass (p.241), bustard (p.307), or kid stuffed with truffles (p.366) may not be that simple to manage for many of us, there are dozens that invite an attempt. I tried and loved the wast mashtur (p.151)—the open-faced sandwich slathered in walnut oil, heated, served with egg yolk of soft-boiled eggs—though I had to skip the required condiment of fermented sauce. The sandwich even boasts its own poem by the Abbasid Prince Ibrahim bin al-Mahdi, which adds to the delight of eating it. It is indeed easy to imagine trying one of the cold poultry dishes (chapter 31), some of the dips and sauces (chapter 34), or perhaps a variety of nougat (chapter 104). The same is true of the omelet and scrambled egg dishes of chapter 79; the first of these, the “white omelet,” calls for ground pistachio, almond, and walnut, and could be the star course at a healthy brunch. At all times Nasrallah is careful to footnote the recipes with many
details and facts, helping the reader to understand the range of ingredients and practices.

Al-Warraq’s text also educates the modern reader on a fundamental aspect of medieval Arab society, that of adab. This concept translates generally into “decorum” (Nasrallah’s apt rendition) and is the rubric used for modeling all kinds of behavior in society: hunting, dress, games, and ways to address people, to name a few. Food has its own adab, and the text discusses the details of decorum associated with eating. The book ends with four helpful sections put together by Nasrallah: an appendix lists key people and places related to the cookbook and is followed by thirty-five beautiful plates of mostly Persian and Arabic artwork that give the reader a fascinating visual reference point. After these Nasrallah provides an Arabic-English glossary as well as an English-Arabic one, both of which will be of great utility to students of Arabic and culinary history.

The book will have many uses for different readers. It explains food from the cultural, linguistic, historical, and medical points of view, giving the reader a window into the richness of daily and intellectual life in Baghdad. The recipes are fun to read and constantly shift the boundary between the exotically distant and the uncannily familiar. We notice a remarkable continuity in how we understand and use food today, yet we also witness unusual ingredients and exotic combinations. Both of these teach us a valuable lesson about the rich cultural history of Baghdad and invite us to resist the relentless one-sided representation of that city in today’s media.

—Leila Rouhi, Williams College

The Good Wife’s Guide (Le Ménagier de Paris):
A Medieval Household Book
Translated by Gina L. Greco and Christine M. Rose
232 pp. $69.95 (cloth) $24.95 (paper)

The late-fourteenth-century manuscript known as Le Ménagier de Paris, newly translated as The Good Wife’s Guide, is a unique artifact of French medieval female domestic education. This translation, by Gina L. Greco and Christine M. Rose, is the first in English to have kept all the parts of the original 1393 manuscript together. Greco and Rose have included the original “gardening instructions, over 380 recipes, menus for feasts, tips on choosing servants, advice about keeping fleas out of bed-clothes, medical care for horses, and directions for raising and training hawks…Prose and poetry, treatises and recipes, morals and menus” (p.1).

Several versions of the manuscript circulated in the late Middle Ages, and at least one of them appears to have been recopied well into the sixteenth century. Like many other medieval manuscripts, the text is a compilation of various bits from numerous sources. It was common practice in medieval and early modern Europe for authors to compile their own books by copying from other sources. The French bibliophile and collector Baron Jérôme Pichon did not publish Le Ménagier as a printed book until 1846.1 In the twentieth century a modernized French version and an English version appeared, both abridged.

Greco and Rose write of their intention in translating the book. “Considering this compelling text as a whole is crucial to historicizing reading practices, understanding the author’s purposes and the late medieval audience’s actual reading matter, and noting what they cared to preserve for use in their households” (p.5). Staying true to their word, in addition to the valuable compilation of recipes and menus incorporated from Le Viandier of Taillevent and other medieval sources, they have included three “verbose didactic texts” that the translators have restored to their proper place to allow modern readers to study and judge for themselves the text as it was meant to be read in the Middle Ages.

Many food historians will be at least vaguely familiar with Le Ménagier’s culinary riches. They are all gloriously rendered in this translation. Yet, the themes of wifely conduct—obedience, fidelity, patience, virtuous hard work—were equally as important for a young wife’s education as learning to shop in the Paris markets, compose a menu, and hire servants. The splendid and erudite introduction that Greco and Rose supply makes it possible for the modern reader to navigate the sections of rather grim medieval moral instruction. The three sections earlier translators dropped are the story of Griselda, the story of Melibee and Prudence, and the allegorical poem Le Chemin de povreté et de richesse. In restoring and explicating these, Greco and Rose open a valuable window onto the role of and expectations for a good bourgeois wife in Paris in 1393. Greco and Rose warn us pointedly that in these texts women are frequently compared to animals (dogs, horses) because of the medieval feminine ideal of unquestioning loyalty and obedience to their master (or husband).

The manuscript was supposedly originally compiled by an older Parisian man in order to guide his young bride in her new life as a wife and the mistress of a respectable and wealthy household. Importantly, this edition puts a young wife’s culinary and household duties into the larger