one of the several generations of Russes who have operated Russ and Daughters Fish Shop in the Lower East Side; and the wildly passionate, poetic prose of Annie Rachelle Lanzillotto in her constant search for a respectable answer to her grandmother Rose’s “Cosa mangia oggi?” (What did you eat today?)

With such a rich mixture, Gastropolis should not be wolfed down; each of the seventeen essays must be individually savored. The collection is more illustrative than exhaustive, whetting appetites and inferring that the riches of New York’s food culture are too vast to be contained in a single volume. If New York City is the ladle of America’s melting pot, then the stew simmering within is a fusion-inspired dish, seasoned with history and flavored with the cultures and memories of all who have made Gotham the epicurean epicenter it has come to be.

—Joy Parks, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Diets and Dieting: A Cultural Encyclopedia
Sander L. Gilman
New York: Routledge, 2008
xii + 308 pp. $55.00 (cloth)

Although Sander Gilman’s encyclopedia contains many interesting and informative passages pertaining to both well-known and obscure diet practices, it belittles the obesity epidemic, and instead of defining diet in terms of a healthy, long-term lifestyle, it confines the term to issues of control and deprivation. This approach limits the scope of what this “cultural encyclopedia” actually reveals about our own diet culture.

Many of the topics relating to nutrition are well done and informative. An entry on “Men: Dieting and Eating Disorders” offers many different angles and explains why few men are diagnosed with eating disorders: “It is difficult...to accurately measure the prevalence or increase of eating disorders in men because male anorexics and bulimics have been frequently misdiagnosed or overlooked by doctors who were culturally and scientifically conditioned to recognize pathological eating primarily in women” (p.182). This entry is helpful in the way it uses facts to make conjectures and question assumptions.

There is a cute (or frightening, depending on how you look at it) section on how pets are gaining weight along with the general population: they are getting “not enough exercise and too much food” (p.212). This observation seems so obvious, yet I have never thought about it before. Pets are mostly kept indoors. Their owners work and don’t have enough time to attend to their pets, just as they don’t have enough time to attend to their own bodies. This entry offers another example of how Gilman successfully discusses cultural implications beyond the data presented.

There are also entries that will delight anyone interested in the history of which foods were once believed to be healthy. The entry on Horace Fletcher, “better known as ‘the great masticator’” (p.100), describes Fletcher’s belief that “Nature will castigate those who don’t masticate” (p.101).

Gilman describes how intellectuals of the day, including Franz Kafka, followed Fletcher’s prescriptions: “Franz Kafka’s father hid behind the newspaper at the dinner table, not wanting to watch his son compulsively chew” (p.101).

Such interesting anecdotes from the past are especially engaging. But once the book moves into the realm of health and nutrition, Gilman does not give the experts a voice, and there is no chance for diet to mean anything other than what the diet industry promotes. Gilman questions the validity of the term obesity epidemic many times, stating in the section on “Advertising”: “In light of the obesity epidemic that is claimed to be sweeping the nation...” (p.3). It is unclear why Gilman chooses to make light of the situation. Had he offered data to support his stance it would be one thing, but he does not; neither does he discuss statistics regarding increased obesity rates. In a section called “Obesity Epidemic” (pp.201–203) he fails to consider a few crucial points, mentioning neither the documented increase in portion sizes nor the billions of dollars spent on marketing by the food industry to get people to eat more. Although Gilman states seven potential reasons for the obesity epidemic, none explain what has precipitated this public-health crisis.

The book suffers from some repetition and poor editing. Can an encyclopedia use Wikipedia as a source? This one does, under the entry on “Bodybuilding” (p.30).

What, ultimately, does this volume say about our culture of eating? It ends up being more about dieting than about diets. I wish Gilman had included more discussion of our culture today, how we are eating more processed food than ever before, how we are cooking less and taking less time to eat. These important and worrisome characteristics of our current diet and dieting culture are missing from this book.

—Rachel Berger, New York University