I usually drink only coffee in the morning, but today I sat down with a cup of Howqua, a Chinese tea with British engagements. I am not turning, as the British did, from coffee to tea, but Victor H. Mair and Erling Hoh’s *The True History of Tea* makes a compelling argument for doing so. The idea of a “true” history of tea presents a challenge for the scholar. How can a single volume, however elegantly written and illustrated, include all that is true in the history of one of the most powerful beverages on the planet? Although it doesn’t include everything, the book does provide a superior infusion of stories.

From its botanical origins in Southeast Asia, *Camellia sinensis*, is literally and figuratively a singular drink. The story of tea includes the fact that it is a singular botanical plant: all teas are one. The teas we drink are diverse because of the geographies, histories, and cultural stories behind them. The story of tea is also the story of power, as colonialism made tea the epitomizing drink of the British, and the force of religion made it the approved drink of Islam. The power of culture made tea a necessity of life in China: by the ninth century it was encoded in the list of daily needs: firewood, rice, salt, oil, soy sauce, and tea—a pretty good list for survival today, too.

The social uses of tea are many, varied by place, time, and gender. Tea was a stimulant at male gatherings in Europe and the Middle East. Meanwhile, coffee characterized male social settings in England by the 1640s, and to some this signaled revolution or ribaldry. The civilizing force of tea and ladies created quite a different setting as grandes dames poured tea at the weekly salons in their homes.

The book’s sidebars are vivid. We learn that China may have conquered Tibet by making Tibetans into tea addicts, drawing them into the horses-for-tea trade and into dependency on the Chinese. Here, too, are fascinating stories of mares’-milk-drinking nomadic Mongols, who saw tea as effeminizing and too civilized by half. We learn about the elegant shape of the clipper ships in the tea trade; the spread of magical tea potions by Daoist sages who noted “they can cure the hundred diseases…but they will not make people not die” (p. 35); the condiments with which tea was spiced in China in the Tang dynasty: ginger, tangerine peel, peppermint, and scallion. For those of us who love such detail the book is full of curiosity-satisfiers, with stories about the evolution of tea utensils and bowls, ceremonies and rituals.

While China and, to some degree, Japan form the center of this historical treatise, attention is also paid to the Middle East, Russia, Europe, and the United States. London was Europe’s coffee-drinking capital in the early 1700s (when it boasted two thousand coffee houses), but the city converted to tea when that became the prime colonial crop. The Boston Tea Party in 1773 dumped ninety thousand pounds of tea in the harbor, but we note that Paul Revere, who opposed the importation of British tea, made elegant silver teapots. There is a very slender chapter on teas of India and Ceylon, and a brief coda on global taste movements in tea today. That there is very little on Korean tea seems a serious oversight, but with the detail we have—such as how to tell an undercover Russian spy by how he drinks his tea (he will wink involuntarily because he will have drunk countless glasses of tea with an eye-threatening spoon still perched inside)—who could fault any omissions?

There are some small errors and typographical mishaps. For example, I found Japanese words misspelled and cultural concepts such as wabi misused. All in all, though, this book’s use of the word “true” in the title, challenging as it might be to scholars, rings with authority. My only caveat: if you pick up this book looking for a recipe for the perfect cup of tea you will be disappointed. I searched everywhere, and while I think I could whip up a cup of Tibetan yak butter tea, I had to read the box of tea in my cupboard to brew my morning cuppa.

—Corky White, Boston University

**Bookends**

*It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time: My Adventures in Life and Food*  
Moira Hodgson  
New York: Nan A. Talese, 2009  
336 pp. $24.95 (cloth)

If exposure informs judgment, Moira Hodgson was born to be a critic, a position she held at the *New York Observer*. As a child in the fifties, shuttled among Egypt, Sweden, Vietnam, and Germany by her English foreign-service parents, her eager mouth took in such delicacies as *ful medames*, gooseberry aquavit, boiled pig’s heart, Bird’s custard powder, and “Blown Poularde ’Rose of May.’” *It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time* describes in dry, wry prose this peripatetic childhood, her bohemian twenties in New York City, and a series of mobile, glamorous years
in Mexico, Paris, Morocco, and London. If the first part of her life is recounted in too detached a way to fully engage the reader, Hodgson’s writing hits its stride once she moves to New York as a young woman. She ruefully recounts carbonizing the salmon and botching the chocolate mousse served at her first dinner party, but soon enough she is confidently sawing pigs in half to fit in the oven and entertaining poets and artists at a table set with a tablecloth from a Fourteenth Street job lot, adorned with silver Georgian candlesticks. The sixties were fully swinging, and Hodgson lost no time in joining the alluring, smoky parties downtown, making all kinds of luminary friends (Allen Ginsberg took her to W.H. Auden’s East Village apartment, whose bedside table drawer allegedly held a one-pound jar of Vaseline and two pairs of castanets). She broke up with her Chilean ballet-dancing boyfriend for Pulitzer Prize-winning poet William Merwin and traveled the world with him, cooking salmon out of a vw van in Lapland, and country ham in motel rooms on the way to Mexico. When this affair, too, ended, she moved to Marrakech, where her left eye began to bother her. In London she learned that it must be removed. “Did you lose your eye in a Middle East war?” someone later asked at a party. “No, in the Middlesex ward,” she quipped.

Hodgson has certainly lived a full life and lived it well, with love and drama in appropriate proportions. She is rather aloof as she tells her story, with real emotion seeping into the prose only at the death of her father (who, she found out as an adult, was actually a spy for British Intelligence). One of her grandfathers Fletcherized his food, chewing each mouthful exactly thirty-two times before swallowing, while the other died at the dinner table, his arm raised in a toast. One has the impression that Hodgson is a perfect amalgam of both.

— Nathalie Jordi, Shanagarry, Ireland

The Living Shore: Rediscovering a Lost World
Rowan Jacobsen. Illustrations by Mary Elder Jacobsen.
New York: Bloomsbury, 2009
167 pp. $20.00 (cloth)

The Living Shore, Rowan Jacobsen’s lyrical account of seven days aboard a research vessel with scientists hoping to understand the ins and outs of a healthy, thriving Olympia oyster bed—once the reigning oyster along British Columbia’s 16,780-mile coastline—is a slender volume. But it is a slender volume that offers up hefty facts, facts that are capable of changing forever one’s thoughts about the interrelatedness of all animals and ecosystems.

In a discussion of wild salmon, for example, and their recent declines, Jacobsen lets drop that “a third of the nitrogen in bc [British Columbia] valley floors was once salmon, as is 90 percent of the nitrogen in a grizzly bear” (p.35). Even if you appreciated before how nutrients move out of the oceans and onto dry land, here is a number you won’t soon forget. What will happen to grizzly bears as fewer and fewer salmon make their spawning runs each year? What will happen to the rest of us, who also depend on healthy oceans and diverse, multilayered ecosystems?

Another of these hefty facts, and one that sheds lights on the importance of estuaries—where rivers meet oceans—and the shellfish that support them, is that a single eastern oyster, the kind of oyster that used to cover the bottom of the Chesapeake Bay, or estuary (before we ate most of them and buried the rest in sludge), filters fifty gallons of water a day. It removes the algae, dead particles, and toxins from a bathtub full of water every twenty-four hours (p.48).

The smaller Olympia oyster, or Oly, filters less—ten gallons a day—but all oysters, along with the rest of the shellfish that populate a productive estuary, are an estuary’s built-in and totally free filtration plant. We should be paying them, in other words, instead of eating them. At least we should be making sure that their beds are protected from sewage and overharvesting so these animals can go about doing what they do better than any manmade filters.

Though I have quibbles with Jacobsen’s emphasis on the shore-based theory of human evolution—he plays down the fact that omega-3s originate in all photosynthesizers, aquatic and terrestrial—I have no quibbles with his conclusion: that shellfish play an important role in our health and the health of our estuaries. And they deserve much better treatment.

— Susan Allport, author, The Queen of Fats

Good Food
Written and directed by Mark Dworkin and Melissa Young
Bullfrog Films
dvd, 73 minutes

By now it’s old news that there are benefits—to the environment, the economy, and people—to eating local food. After all, the New Oxford American Dictionary named locavore the Word of the Year in 2007, giving credence to the idea that compared to food grown in some faraway, nameless place, produce grown and consumed locally