Ground Up
Michael Idov

Transactions in Taste: The Collaborative Lives of Everyday Bengali Food
Manpreet K. Janeja

Oceans of Wine
David Hancock

New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2009
xxix + 632 pp. Illustrations. $50.00 (cloth)

I used to sell Madeira, essentially a Sisyphean task. Wine buyers at best had a vague acquaintance with it— “Sort of like Sherry, but not!”— and were immovably skeptical about the prospect of convincing a customer that he or she might want to shell out thirty or forty dollars for a bottle of Bual or Malmsey. “Madeira’s delicious!” I’d say. “Who cares?” they’d say. But after reading David Hancock’s magisterial Oceans of Wine: Madeira and the Emergence of American Trade and Taste, I think: Well, shoot—would that I’d had the same job back in 1720.

There is no fall from grace in the wine world more profound than that of Madeira, which at its peak in the early 1700s accounted for more than 75 percent of all the wine imported into the United States. That would equate to more than seven million gallons per year in today’s wine market: rather than celebrating placing an individual bottle at some mom-and-pop liquor store in Queens, importers selling Madeira would be shipping tanker-trucks of the stuff. Hard to imagine, perhaps; but part of Hancock’s success lies in how thoroughly he recreates an era when Madeira was central not just to the economy of wine but to the entire realm of Atlantic trade.

Oceans of Wine is primarily a work of economic history, rather than a wine book, which does mean that for readers who don’t have an interest in how trade networks develop, there can be some windless seas of detail to navigate—“a
typical counting room or counting house contained the wherewithal for business…writing desks, stools, candlesticks and candles, pencils, pens, ink and inkstands, sand and pounce boxes, paper in several qualities, and account books” (p.232)—as well as a vast amount of information about the actual economic structure and development of the Madeira business, which of course is central to Hancock’s book. But even for casual readers, there is also a wealth of fascinating material throughout, ranging from cogent and clearly drawn analyses of developments in the social role of Madeira—and of wine in general—in this era, to more offbeat recountsings of the ins and outs of the pre-industrial-era wine trade.

For me, at least, it is hard not to be fascinated by something like the following helpful advice, culled by Hancock from Philip Miller’s *Gardener’s Dictionary*, published in 1752, and Caspar Neumann’s *The Chemical Works*, from 1759:

‘To help stinking Wines,’ one could rack them from ‘old and corrupt’ lees. Alternatively, one could hang ‘in them little bags of spices,’ like ginger, cloves, cinnamon, and grains of paradise; one could insert elderflower or lavender; one could introduce a boiled decoction of ‘some of these spices’…To correct ‘rankness, eagerness, and pricking of Sacks and other sweet wines,’ some stirred in white limestone; to help ‘pricked’ French wines, some added powders of Flanders tile and Roche alum; to ameliorate Rhenish wines, some racked it ‘into a clean and strong-smelling cask or vat’ and mixed it with a concoction of beaten honey and skim milk. (p.83)

It is also hard not to be both intrigued and alarmed by the offhand mention of Madeira merchant James Smart, found dead in his bed after having “overloaded his stomach” (p.141) with lobster.

All these many details parade by in service of Hancock’s larger goal. His overarching purpose is to tell the story of how trade in Madeira served a vital role in linking “the markets and cultures of the Atlantic,” (p.xxix) and specifically to show how individual people and their personal networks were the primary forces that allowed the Madeira trade to fulfill that role. Also, as he notes, the Madeira trade “is in many ways representative of how Atlantic trades were organized and how institutions grew up around them in the years between 1640 and 1815” (p.399). Madeira is a mirror, essentially; through its expansion one can also extrapolate the expansion of the markets for spices, medicines, and other goods. “The characteristics of the Madeira system are replicated wherever the behavior of the traders themselves, rather than the dictates of a monopoly agent, whether state or private, initiated changes in the features of a trade” (pp.399–400).

Hancock’s ambition with *Oceans of Wine* is substantial. Yet it is no insult to say that one measure of his success is that a sip of Madeira after finishing this book becomes a far more complex and rewarding experience than one might ever expect it to be.

—Ray Isle, *Food & Wine*

**POWER FOOD LEXICOM**

Miralda
Barcelona: Fundacion Food Cultura, 2008
588 pp. Illustrations. $24.95 (paper)

Miralda, the guiding force behind POWER FOOD LEXICOM, is a lofty Barcelona artist and former proprietor of Manhattan’s storied El Internacional restaurant. The two undefined coinages of his title offer an early clue that this book is artist-driven. Published in 2008 to commemorate World Food Day, *POWER FOOD* is far-ranging, sensual, and politically minded. This fervid volume provides evidence galore of the gastro-political passions raging throughout the world.

Is there anyone knowledgeable enough to cogitate every word and picture in this trilingual Basque, Castilian, and English book? I don’t think I’ll ever tire of flipping through POWER FOOD’s wildly diverse pages, at once encyclopedic