When Mark Twain lived in Europe, he often yearned for American things, especially American food. Though he sometimes enjoyed good meals in European homes, he excoriated European restaurant food, German beers and wines, French hauteur, and exorbitant prices. Craving fine, unpretentious American foods, he made a wish list—a menu—of American delectables. It runs for two full pages and is the inspiration for Andrew Beahrs’s bold and expansive rumination, *Twain’s Feast: Searching for America’s Lost Foods in the Footsteps of Samuel Clemens*. Though it offers fascinating glimpses of Samuel Clemens’s culinary passions and adventures, *Twain’s Feast* includes much, much more. It is a digressive and omnivorous literary smorgasbord, sampling culinary history, personal memoir, natural history, ecological commentary, and sociological musing. Mark Twain is this book’s inspiration, but Andrew Beahrs is himself its presiding spirit.

At one point or another, Beahrs discusses all of the eighty-plus items on Twain’s “menu.” However, the order...
in which he addresses them and the amount of attention each receives follow an unpredictable logic. Thus, his opening chapter, “They Were So Lovely They Made Me Cry,” discusses “prairie-hens from Illinois” with an exquisite amalgam of personal narrative, natural history, and social history. In his passionate curiosity to understand Twain’s particularity about prairie hens from Illinois, Beahrs joins an excursion to observe the spring mating ritual—called “booming”—of the roughly three hundred still surviving in Illinois. To explain how a population of countless millions could decline to only three hundred in less than a century, Beahrs describes how the richest and deepest topsoil in the world produced the lush, complexly diverse midwestern prairies, how annual fires sustained that ecosystem, and how the sod-busting steel plows invented by John Deere at first led to an ideal habitat for prairie chickens yet subsequently enabled the total destruction of the prairies and the unique topsoil that nourished them.

Combining cultivated fields and natural prairie fueled an explosion—inevitably temporary—of prairie chicken populations. This, coupled with the technological innovation of refrigerated rail cars, transformed this local delicacy into a national culinary fad. Habitat destruction and excessive harvesting thrust this seemingly inexhaustible species to the brink of extinction. Though he cannot feast upon these threatened hens, Beahrs invokes their culinary appeal by quoting nineteenth-century descriptions and recipes. Here as elsewhere, he effectively invokes via analogy. Most memorably, he explains that Chesapeake canvasback ducks acquire their distinctive flavor because they gorge on wild aquatic celery in Chesapeake Bay. Beahrs similarly describes various subspecies of oysters, terrapins, and other animals that have had the misfortune to become culinary fads. Their inherent appeal is quintessentially local, because they exude the savor of their unique environment. Why they ravish palates is obvious. Regrettably, appreciation mutates into epicurean and commercial voracity, and robust species fade to remnants, spiraling toward the void.

Twain’s Feast makes mutually illuminating the personal culinary narratives of Mark Twain, Andrew Beahrs, and the American people, contextualized with discussions of geography, ecology, natural history, and social history. Explaining the history of foods requires expansiveness. Nonetheless, eclecticism sometimes wanders into self-indulgence. Beahrs’s leaps of association sometimes land in a morass. The lyrical discussion of prairie chickens opens the book vividly, but the next chapter, on opossums and raccoons, inauspiciously mires us in distasteful precincits. Possums do, at least, have their enthusiasts, as Beahrs illustrates with two early twentieth-century recipes and a Paul Laurence Dunbar poem. Raccoon, however, is not suckling pig. Beahrs describes it as worse than muskrat, his previous culinary nadir. He decided to experience America’s only annual coon dinner, an event aptly isolated in an Ozarks backwater called Gillett. Revealingly, even the people who prepare six hundred pounds of coon every year really don’t like eating coon. The fact that Beahrs made the trip hardly justifies devoting a chapter to such woeful fare. A brief anecdote would have sufficed.

Fortunately, Beahrs’ excursions are usually interesting and sometimes unforgettable. He avidly traces Mark Twain’s culinary adventures, from childhood memories of wild game on the Quarles farm, to the famous 1877 debacle of his botched after-dinner speech at Boston’s Brunswick Hotel, to Thanksgivings at his home in Hartford. Numerous recipes, plus menus from the Brunswick dinner, Twain’s holiday feasts, and other occasions are special delights. Twain’s Feast memorably explores other regional specialties, some of which we have not yet managed to decimate, from Vermont maple syrup, Maine lobsters, and Massachusetts cranberries to New Orleans sheep-heads and Lake Tahoe trout. Beahrs takes Twain’s rambling list of personal favorites and brings it to life in this deliciously idiosyncratic book.

—David Lionel Smith, Williams College

Appetite for America: How Visionary Businessman Fred Harvey Built a Railroad Hospitality Empire That Civilized the Wild West
Stephen Fried
New York: Bantam Books, 2010
xix + 432 pp. $27.00

The years since World War II have seen the end of many institutions that once were so large and powerful that they seemed likely to outlast the stars, including Pan American World Airways, the Pennsylvania Railroad, and Anaconda Copper. Fred Harvey—the company was just called “Fred Harvey,” and not “The Fred Harvey Company” or “Fred Harvey Incorporated”—was another that once seemed destined to be a permanent part of American life. It wasn’t as huge as Anaconda or Pan Am, nor was it a true national enterprise, since its restaurants, hotels, and newsstands were located mainly west of the Mississippi, along the tracks of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad. But at its peak it had scores of restaurants and lunch counters, and all along the Sante Fe line it managed a dozen hotels and