Barolo
Matthew Gavin Frank
Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2010
224 pp. $24.95 (cloth)

There is a kind of fever that afflicts some of us. It takes hold of our imagination and our dreams and sustains us through our darkest days. The fever is a romantic, all-encompassing desire for the sensual pleasures of Italy—for Italian food, wine, and culture. I know, because this fever struck me and didn’t subside until I spent nearly a year studying, working, and traveling through “the boot.” For food writer and restaurant veteran Matthew Frank, this fever is even more specific; it is Barolo.

Barolo is the story of the author’s time spent in a revered region of Italy where Barolo is produced—working, cooking, drinking, and dining. It is part travel guide, part memoir, and thoroughly engaging. Barolo is one of the most celebrated wines in Italy, and Frank gets to know it well through his time with cult winemaker Luciano Sandrone. But life in Italy is not all wine and roses, and Frank shares not only his rapture with all things Barolo but also the gritty side of working illegally in the vineyards. It is backbreaking work, to put it mildly, and living out of a tent in a garden doesn’t make it any better. Frank sleeps in a soggy sleeping bag and works for free and for the occasional bottle of rare wine. This is a story most will enjoy reading rather than experiencing firsthand. It is a whirlwind of contrasts. One minute Frank is mopping the floor, and the next dining on Barolo braised rabbit with white truffle shavings. But all of this adds to the appeal of the book. The author’s passion is clear and his enthusiasm absolutely genuine, no matter the trying circumstances.

Barolo comes from the hills of the Langhe in Piedmont, which is not as well known outside of Italy as Tuscany. The region is renowned for food as well as wine, including baci di dama cookies, luxurious pasta like ravioli al Plin, salumi, and truffles. It is also where you will find more obscure and exotic delicacies like Parmesan flan served with carne crudo, rosolio (a rose liqueur), and salamina da sugo, an ancient sausage made of offal, spices, and wine. Frank describes them all in mouthwatering detail.

The book delves into the culinary history of the region, including the economy of Barolo, the truffles of Alba, and the Slow Food movement of Bra, with scholarly detail and insight. Even the minor details are entertaining, like learning how grissini were created to sustain a weak and sickly duke who went on to recover and become the first Savoy king. An American through and through, Frank repeatedly uses Big Macs and Bon Jovi as points of reference, which gives the book an interesting perspective.

A brief visit to the Salone del Gusto in Turin is captured in tasty snapshots of prosciutto, ice cream, sausage, and vinegar, as much as in the observations of the vendors and flirtations with a salon ticket salesgirl. At times the scenes are a blur. Those of us who have lived in Italy are familiar with this blur. Even under the best of circumstances there are cultural differences that can make one’s head spin. Frank accurately depicts the “lost in translation” sense of confusion one experiences in Italy. Does the butcher really expect him to eat raw tripe? Well, yes, he does, and it is something the author and the reader will never forget.

Being shy does not serve one well in Italy. As many a visitor can attest, one meets family, friends, and friends of friends until it seems that everyone is connected to everyone else. It is the interaction with Italians that above all else shapes one’s experience. The author makes connections with locals person by person, from a bed-and-breakfast proprietress to a winemaker to chefs and bakers. It is these acquaintances that lead to brief apprenticeships in restaurants and shops, always with the singsong invitation vieni qua, vieni qua meaning “come here.” Frank describes people colorfully. His writing is full of tiny details and thoroughly original impressions: the bakery twins are a hydra, truffle hunters and their dogs are modern-day Santa Clauses and Rudolphs.

There is pleasure not just in the subject of Barolo, but also in Frank’s writing. A master of the unexpected metaphor, Frank commands prose that is lively and original; he never resorts to cliché. At times the writing seems a bit over the top—“As the sun drips the last of its hazelnut panna cotta with a glass of Perdaudin Passito 1985” (p.28)—but that is easily forgivable. After all, this is Italy we’re talking about, the land of abbondanza.

—Amy Sherman, cookingwithamy.blogspot.com/

Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape
Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann
New York: Routledge, 2010
256 pp. $31.95 (paper)

In sociology, the notion of omnivorousness has for a long time been shorn of its original gustatory denotations to connotate instead the myriad practices by which status-seekers today set out to achieve the aura of distinction by openness.
to a variety of cultural offerings in the world at large. Omnivorousness, that is, has to do with an impression of cultivation that comes not from allegiance to one form of culture alone but from absorption of many cultures: for instance, in music (where a lot of the sociological literature on omnivorousness has focused) the omnivore finds distinction not by liking just one form of music (classical music, say) but by being receptive to lots and lots of appreciable forms (say, classical music alongside jazz, world music, ethnic music, folk cultural music, and so on).

With Foodies, sociologists Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann return the concept of omnivorousness to the realm of food studies by examining how today’s foodies exhibit an openness to a multiplicity of food experiences that can seem liberal (or, in the authors’ term, democratic) but that is also potentially a way for boundaries of status and cultural distinction to be set up and tenaciously maintained. The authors trace a contemporary history of privileged investment in distinctive food that starts with the dethroning of stuffy, pretentious French food as the single standard for gustatory excellence and the promotion instead of multiple forms of food as potential paths to fine taste. It’s not so much that French food has somehow been revealed to be bad (although, in a seemingly democratic climate, devotion to it can sometimes seem retrograde, if not reactionary). It’s that, for the foodie, haute cuisine is not the only way that gustatory goodness can be achieved.

The foodie, as Johnston and Baumann argue, may still quite like a fancy meal at an upscale restaurant, but he or she is also quite open to the miraculous find of a roadside food shack or hole-in-the-wall off in the middle of nowhere. Today’s food-oriented status-seeker finds value in the seemingly simple, the folkloric, the local, the ethnically cultural. Examining the discourse of foodies, both through quantitative and qualitative analysis of upscale food journals (such as the now deceased Gourmet) and through interviews with self-identified food enthusiasts, Johnston and Baumann outline a series of common motifs in the ways foodies (and their preferred publications) represent their quest after tasteful experience. For example, a statistical analysis shows that many magazine stories are about connecting a wonderful dish or ingredient to a place of origin (the more exotic or folkloric or romantic the better), to inspiring stories about the people involved in the cuisine (and the meaningful legacies they partake of), to tropes of simplicity and anti-modernism (for example, as one story has it, hand-patted tortillas are better than machine-flattened ones), to mythologies of authenticity, and so on.

Importantly, as a means to cultural distinction, omnivorousness is not, as Johnston and Baumann clarify, about liking all cultural offerings: the opennessness to wide experience always has its limits and borders ( upscale music lovers may like early but not late Sinatra, and most revile Muzak; foodies may like street food but not chain fast food, except as a “guilty pleasure”). The cultural omnivore needs to fix on practices that themselves can be invested with connotations of privilege, perfection, specialness, and so on, and not everything out in the world ultimately will make the grade. Omnivorousness may seem more generous than snobbish fixation on one type of exclusive and exclusionary Culture, but it is also no less about drawing distinctions between “right” and “wrong” paths to taste.

No doubt, such conclusions will not be that surprising to anyone who reflects for a bit on the class structure and corresponding ideologies of foodie culture. As is perhaps often typical of research in sociology, the value of Johnston and Baumann’s scholarship lies less in any bold, new insights they come up with about how cultural distinction operates today than in the data and discourse analysis theymarshal to capture and confirm the endurance of patterns of cultural uplift and division at work in modern society. Rich in anecdote and example, and quite readable (this, for one, is a work of sociology without an overload of jargon and statistical formulae), Foodies offers a quite useful context for the analysis of food’s ideological functions.

—Dana Polan, New York University

Fat, Gluttony and Sloth: Obesity in Literature, Art and Medicine
David Haslam and Fiona Haslam
Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009
326 pp. Illustrations. $39.95 (paper)

This is an ambitious book, spanning three capacious spheres (literature, art, and medicine), and several centuries, albeit not consistently or systematically. Each chapter presents a theme in historical perspective, yet at times this history seems almost spurious—for instance, the dizzying speed at which the authors move from Apollonius of Memphis coining the term “diabetes” in 250 B.C. to Elvis, a sufferer of diabetes, dying of a heart attack in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1977 after years of a notorious high-caloric, high-fat diet (pp.21–22). The book is more interesting and historically coherent in other chapters. The authors’ discussion of the connections between excessive consumption of food and drink and the changing moral evaluations of such behavior over time are often compelling. The chapters on