the aesthetics and spirituality of chanoyu, the ceremonial consumption of whisked powdered tea in a highly refined setting. In an interesting counterpoint, Patricia J. Graham explicates the lesser-known practice of senchado, a ritual structured around steeped leaf tea, and suggests that its invocation of Chinese monastic and literati values during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries challenged what was seen as an ostentatious, rather than spiritual, pursuit of chanoyu by the samurai class. Reiko Tanimura also addresses the secularization of chanoyu in an assessment of women’s participation in this traditionally male ritual, but whereas Graham understands both spirituality and materialism as culturally constructed values that productively shaped social identities, Tanimura criticizes the shift from a “numinous” experience to a “trivializing” pastime (p.125).

Section three considers the transformation of tea from exotic luxury to democratized staple in Europe and North America during the eighteenth century. Woodruff D. Smith shows how tea drinking came to define specifically Western, middle-class notions of morality, healthfulness, and domesticity. Angus Trumble discusses family portraits in which tea services signify status, and Barbara G. Carson presents a document-based study of consumption patterns in the American colonies. Jane T. Merritt nuances the conventional understanding of the American Revolution, which emphasizes the Boston Tea Party as a pivotal event, by examining other instances of resistance to British taxation in various cities both before and after the infamous destruction of a large tea shipment in Boston Harbor in December 1773.

Political concerns continue in the final section, which returns to Asia to confront the imperial policies, violence, and suffering that enabled tea consumption in the modern West. John E. Wills Jr. reveals the insidious interdependence of the tea and opium trades in China between 1700 and 1842. Elizabeth Kolsky discusses oppressive indentured labor at Indian tea plantations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where harvests were destined for sale not only to the prosperous people depicted in period advertising, but also to a growing population of poor British factory workers. Linking past and present, editor Beatrice Hohenegger prefaces these closing chapters with a call for improved working conditions, better support for small-scale growers, and environmental sustainability in the contemporary tea industry.

The book’s greatest strengths are its interdisciplinary scope; the interplay among chapters illuminated by cross-references and the editor’s introduction and section prefaces; and the large number of high quality, informatively captioned, color illustrations. These include scenes of tea consumption in Chinese scrolls, Japanese woodblock prints, and European caricatures, as well as a remarkable variety of tea wares from Asian drinking bowls to colonial American silver to contemporary ceramicists’ riffs on the conventions of teapot design. Readers with special interests might wish for more discussion of certain objects or topics, but the book does not claim to be comprehensive. Rather, it offers insightful glimpses of history in an attractively designed format that rewards both casual browsing and close reading. With accessible erudition, Steeped in History demonstrates how the values, practices, and artifacts of many societies over hundreds of years have shaped the shifting meanings of a beverage that many of us take for granted. Hohenegger and her collaborators have given us much to think about when we think of tea.

—Mimi Hellman, Skidmore College

Bookends

Bitter Greens: Essays on Food, Politics, and Ethnicity from the Imperial Kitchen
Anthony Di Renzo
xxii + 218 pp. $19.95 (cloth)

Anthony Di Renzo’s essays do exactly what Dr. Johnson said literature should do: entertain and instruct. But they also flay, skin, skewer, grill, boil, and toast their subject, be it food, family, history, ethnicity, politics, or the self. At their best, and in faultless prose, they reveal the workings of an examined life with deft wit and pathos. Like Ruth Reichl and other food memoirists before him, Di Renzo includes recipes, from antipasto to nightcap, but they are mostly beside the point. This is a book of memoir spiced with unabashed political critique and salted with astringent self-examination. Quoting a panoply of sources, from Samuel Beckett to Cicero, Horace to Ray Kroc, Di Renzo asks us to examine the costs of free market capitalism from the perspective of a first-generation Italian-American foodie. He links the rise of Wegmans, the highly successful central New York gourmet supermarket chain, to the decline of the neighborhood grocery and the disappearance of affordable Abruzzese soppressata; relates the contribution of an Italian-American classicist to McDonald’s success in the global market; recounts his grandfather’s fatal addiction to chocolate via the history of Sicilian chocolate-making; and
elaborates on the relationship of Italian-Americans to their soul food, broccoli rabe, the “bitter greens” of the book’s title.

At first Di Renzo’s “café philosophy” is fun to eavesdrop on from the next table, but, given his acid wit, you might find yourself wary of a full dinner invitation. His reflections derive from the crimes of American imperialism, his perception that Italian-Americans have betrayed their roots for “the sweet lies of upward mobility” (p.102), and his own long list of personal failures. But, as he reminds us, quoting Beckett, “the bitter laugh…is the ethical laugh” (p.102). While cooking is his retreat from life’s follies and betrayals, he wouldn’t write if he didn’t care. One might regret Di Renzo’s brief nod to “background texts” and the lack of notes or a bibliography, but ultimately his book is an example of the power of humanitas: how contemplation, learning, and rhetoric can make the stew of our lives, public and private, richer and more complex than anything money can buy.

—Naomi Guttman, Hamilton College

Wisdom of the Last Farmer: Harvesting Legacies from the Land
David Mas Masumoto
New York: Free Press, 2009
xii + 238 pp. $25.00 (cloth)

Proust may have been the first to write about how a single food can trigger a memory and joy—think of his famous madeleine—but no author since has captured this phenomenon as exquisitely as David Mas Masumoto when he writes about peaches. Masumoto previously chronicled a year on his family’s organic farm in the central valley of California in Epitaph for a Peach, and in that book the work of growing his dizzyingly delicious Sun Crest and other heirloom peaches, and the simple joys of eating them, were literal. But in Wisdom of the Last Farmer, the peach becomes a symbol of his family’s legacy and of the lessons—hard work, resilience, optimism—that he learned from his forebears, especially his father.

At the center of Masumoto’s story, in fact, is his relationship with his father, whose strength and vision had been the engine behind the farm’s success for decades, but who has suffered a series of strokes in recent years. Masumoto, who learned everything about how to farm well from his father, now sees their roles reversed: as his father recovers from the strokes, Masumoto gently teaches him to reclaim his tasks around the farm—weeding, shoveling, driving the tractor.

One senses it’s these rituals that are essential to his rehabilitation, and to Masumoto’s own identity as a farmer and son.

He traces the history of his family’s ties to the land—from his farmworker immigrant grandparents to his daughter, who may one day succeed him—and finds metaphor and meaning in every relationship, every gesture, and every event, big or small, that shapes the farm over time. He likens his father’s setbacks along the road to recovery to storms that have destroyed an entire season’s crop of raisins, and he sees his luscious Elberta peaches and Le Grand nectarines as tokens of renewal and promise—for his family, and for the future of a sustainable food system.

“A great peach focuses us in the present moment and also transports us to someplace else: the memory of a tree in a grandpa’s backyard, of mothers and daughters in summer kitchens canning peaches or making jam,” he writes. “The peach taste tells you of its own time and place, the feel of the warm sun on its leaves, the energy of its veins and flesh as it draws nourishment and water up through stem and root. It’s the fruit of the tree of good and better” (p.210).

“As with fruit, so with life.”

—Eli Penberthy, Seattle, WA

American Terroir: Savoring the Flavors of Our Woods, Waters, and Fields
Rowan Jacobsen
New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2010
272 pp. Illustrations. $25.00 (cloth)

In his latest book, Rowan Jacobsen applies the idea of terroir—the attributes of a particular environment that contribute to and characterize the taste of local produce—to America. American Terroir comes at the peak of the local food movement and demonstrates that America has as much to celebrate about its own geographies as does Europe, where the concept of terroir first arose.

In writing this book, Jacobsen traveled across North and Central America in search of farmers and producers lucky enough to claim a specific patch of earth or water and skilled enough to coax something special from it. Among the dozen-plus places he writes about are an apple orchard in western Washington, a Panamanian coffee plantation, and the salmon-rich lower reaches of the Yukon River, each of which yields some transcendent and unique foodstuff.

As always, Jacobsen’s writing is alight with thoughtful observation, thorough research, and enthusiasm. His knack for describing flavors makes this a tantalizing read—my