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 ruminations 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—weeping, 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
pantry seemed pale and listless in light of the treasures he evokes. The pull of his narrative is strong enough to inspire emulation if not outright envy; fortunately, Jacobsen includes both recipes—my favorite being a reminder of the simple and sublime combination of avocado, salt, and lime—and source listings for all the ingredients he encounters. Jacobsen appears to spend every waking moment traveling or eating, and his book induces a contradictory combination of wanderlust and delight in the local that leaves the reader hungry for both.

—Jeff Nield, Vancouver, Canada

Animals: A Novel
Don LePan
New York: Soft Skull Press, 2010
160 pp. $13.95 (paper)

No one likes to kick a dog when it’s down. Yet down is just where venerable indie house Soft Skull Press, the American publisher of Don LePan’s debut novel, Animals, has found itself. Saved from financial collapse in 2007 by the Berkeley outfit Counterpoint, Soft Skull survived another few years in New York before closing its doors last October and heading (in name only—its two editors were fired) to the West Coast. This is too bad.

Also pretty bad, though, is LePan’s Animals, which tells of a dark, not-too-distant future where we have gone so far down the road of intensive farming that, if humanity is to survive, we can no longer afford to distinguish between animals and a growing number of human children born with birth defects. These children come to be known as “mon-grels,” and they are raised as both pets and as the industrial food known as yurm.

Part of the book details the life of one such child, Sam, who turns out merely to be deaf, not otherwise “defective”; his harrowing journey to the feedlots provides half the tragedy of the book. The other half is provided by way of a long, detailed history of industrial food production and factory farming, told by a man named Broderick Clark, Sam’s long lost brother. Compelling stuff, to be sure, and LePan’s heart—we could go so far as to say his soul—seems truly in the right place.

What makes Animals tough to get through, though, is the writing itself. Supposedly written by the fictional Naomi Okun, a “renowned novelist and professor of creative writing” (pp.130–131) who happens also to be Sam’s adoptive sister, the narrative sections of the book simply don’t read like the product of a great fiction writer. The prose often feels sophomoric: “[H]e always made himself wait if he was feeling the sadness coming, wait until she had left him, had turned out the light and shut the door. Then it was all right to cry, that was the all-right time” (p.63). The point of view shifts constantly, in a way that, at one point, LePan gets defensive about: “[Naomi’s] reputation as a novelist, of course, has been based very largely on her skill with the very sort of shifting third-person narrative—those who don’t like it call it ‘slippery’—that she offers here” (p.131). Broderick’s history lesson, sad and true as it is, often gets a tad preachy. The result is that in Animals, there is a ton of soul but very little art. And, as it happens, I’m one of those who don’t like it.

—Scott Korb, New York, NY

L’Oursin
Xavier Girard
Marseille: André Dimanche Éditeur, 2010
174 pp. €15

One can divide literary memory into two categories, “the rosebud complex” and “the madeleine complex,” the former characterized by a tragic repression of origins, the latter by a joyful celebration of life. Xavier Girard’s L’Oursin (The Sea Urchin) is an example of just such ecstatic wisdom, ranging from gastronomic meditation to erotic frenzy, from scientific observation to architectural fantasy. But above all it is the autobiography of a writer enamored of the Mediterranean, one who has found his emblem in this bizarre and solitary creature that is the height of contradiction: its interior an empty sphere housing nothing but the enticing delicate orange-red roe, its exterior a forbidding, brittle, spiked bastion. Girard’s flights of rhetoric (whether by analogy, notably the porcupine; or anthesis, the oyster) are pure poetry, and even the Mediterranean declension of the creature’s name reveals its startling complexity: “my favorites are perhaps the lisping zinzu of Ajaccio, the soft zinzu of Bastia, or the tender, crackling and puerile zizinzuz of Cervione.” So as not to disappoint the readers of Gastronomica, I would like to interject a personal note and offer the best recipe for sea urchins I have ever tasted: a Catalan brouillade, where the roe is mixed with egg and cream, placed back into the shell, and cooked to the consistency of a custard. For this book is not, strictly speaking, a gastronomic text, and the mere seven pages devoted to recipes are presented in a tone of disdain, if not