chef Thomas Keller’s famed French Laundry in Napa—found themselves in much the same state of cluelessness about the incredibly exacting standards that a winner has to meet. The competitive cooking that they, and we, discover calls for a relationship to food that may well appall but cannot fail to fascinate.

A sports as well as a food writer, Friedman launches into high competitive mode as he follows the American team through the preliminary trials, the three months of intense preparation, and the final competition of the 2009 Bocuse d’Or. Despite other, older culinary competitions, the biennial competitions of the Bocuse d’Or dominate the culinary scene. As the media never fail to mention, the Olympics supply the model. Indeed, in no other venue is culinary nationalism so marked. National teams are selected after a series of trials. There are regional trials in Asia, Europe, and now South America. Fans in the stadium cheer wildly when their team comes on pumping fists (see www.bouche-dor.com). The trophies of gold, silver, and bronze statuettes of Paul Bocuse recall the Oscars, as does the hype and the sponsors ranging from the City of Lyon, Valrhona chocolate, and Perrier to Nespresso, and more every year. The Bocuse d’Or and the World Pastry Cup are two of the competitions at the SIRHA-International Hotel Catering & Food Trade Exhibition with over two thousand exhibitors.

Although the United States had competed in earlier competitions, 2009 was the first in which Paul Bocuse himself showed great interest in having the United States come in better than the sixth place that had been their best (and would remain so in 2009). The United States is a vital market, and Bocuse is a very savvy businessman. He rounded up a blue-ribbon committee headed by top New York French chef Daniel Boulud and Thomas Keller. (The glossy magazine, Bocuse d’Or USA, started publication in 2010.) They in turn, along with Bocuse’s son Jérôme, head chef at Epcot Center (Disney World), established the Bocuse d’Or-USA Foundation and set about raising funds, finding a chef to represent the United States, organizing the preliminary trials, and recruiting a coach for the chef who would compete. (All the teams have coaches.)

The most striking characteristic of competitive cooking is the perfectionism. Unlike restaurant chefs who look to produce pleasure, competition chefs seek an ideal. They are competing against an idea of great cuisine. Winning competitions requires ornate dishes of exceptional complexity—of presentation and of taste. Time and again, despite or perhaps because of his success as a restaurant chef, Hollingsworth comes up against the unattainable. Friedman gives dishes in detail that only a professional chef will fully appreciate. Boulud’s five-and-a-half page memo (pp.184–189) is a précis of what competitive cooking is all about.

There is no better introduction to the world of competitive cooking than The Kings of Pastry (2010). Documentary filmmakers Chris Hegedus and D.A. Pennebaker follow one French pastry chef (from Chicago) and his bid for the coveted status of Meilleur Ouvrier de France [Best Worker]. We understand why the French and French trained have a competitive edge. This chef, like the others competing with him, is already a seasoned professional. Only a few will be chosen, and it is heart-breaking to see the failures. The sugar sculpture that fell apart at the last minute brought a collective gasp from the audience when I saw the film. Some candidates have failed the competitions more than once, and may well try again. Others give up.

But the Bocuse d’Or did not give Team USA 2009 a second chance. For the 2011 competition the Bocuse d’Or USA Foundation stepped up its efforts to raise money and prepare the candidates (see www.bocusedorusa.org/main/home), and there were a new chef and assistant. The result? A very disappointing tenth place, well after the top three of a Scandinavian sweep (Denmark, Sweden, and Norway; France came in fourth). So, it’s back to the kitchen to ponder the lessons and put them to good use for 2013. It is worth noting that the Danish winner of the gold was a veteran of the competition, since he had already won the bronze in 2005 and the silver in 2007. Champion competitive cooks are not made in a day or a year or even two. Team USA has a lot on its plate.

–Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, Columbia University

King of the Lobby: The Life and Times of Sam Ward, Man-About-Washington in the Gilded Age
Kathryn Allamong Jacob
Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010
240 pp. Illustrations. $40.00 (cloth)

After the Civil War, when U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Hugh McCulloch was charged with curbing the great national debt, he proposed a return to the gold standard. McCulloch, concerned that Congress might not support his bold plan to eliminate the greenback, called one person he knew could help get it passed, the political lobbyist Sam Ward. The sovereign in the title of Kathryn Allamong Jacob’s rigorously researched and fascinating biography, King of the Lobby, knew exactly what to do to help McCulloch. He organized a dinner at his Washington DC home with
the appropriate players gathered to experience Ward’s signature brand of social lobbying, which “enlisted the combination of delicious food, fine wines, sparkling conversation, and a keen knowledge of his guests in a systematic and central way that set him apart” (p. 85).

Jacob, curator of manuscripts at the Schlesinger Library and author of Capital Elites: High Society in Washington DC after the Civil War (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), is well-versed in early American politicking, and repeatedly encountered mention of Ward’s famous dinner parties during her research.1 Upon further digging—nineteenth-century journalist Emily Briggs said, “Nothing was ever served on Sam’s table that was half as delicious as himself” (p. 80)—Jacob recognized the significance of Washington’s earliest gourmand. The potent cocktail of Ward’s deep knowledge of food and fine dining and his colorful personality turned Ward’s dining room into one of the most coveted invitations in Washington, regardless of party affiliation.

Sam Ward was born the son of a prominent banker and (well-) bred in New York City. While attending college at Columbia, Ward began his exploration of fine food at the new European-style café on William Street, Delmonico’s, where he became a regular. “I reveled in the coffee, the chocolate, the Bavaroises, the orgeats and the petits gateaux and the bonbons” (p. 32). After studying mathematics in Europe and appreciating new delicacies, including eggplant and endive, Ward returned to New York to take over his father’s finance business, which he managed to ruin within a few years by over-speculating on commodities. While in New York, he became a staple at society functions, where he met the scores of characters who would prove useful in his political life.

Failing as a banker, Ward decided to try his speculating hand in the Gold Rush and sailed to California, where he met William Gwin. After losing his fortune twice—the second time in a San Francisco fire—Ward was offered a part in a diplomatic mission to Paraguay, at the referral of Gwin, who eventually became a California senator, and his old New York friend, Samuel Latham Mitchell Barlow. In 1859, Ward arrived in Washington DC with several cases of wine and a secret appointment to lobby on behalf of the president of Paraguay.

In order to illustrate the lobbyist’s notable dinners, Jacob looks not just to the papers of Ward (many of which were destroyed at his request by his sister, writer Julia Ward Howe) but of the senators, congressmen, family members, and friends who corresponded with their incomparable host. Jacob literally follows the paper trail of the figures surrounding Ward to create the narrative of his life, with all the sources carefully attributed. One of Ward’s menus, handwritten in French, describes eighteen courses of what would, even by today’s standards, be considered haute cuisine: starting with oysters, proceeding through sweetbreads, croquettes, canvasback duck, currant gelée, various cheeses, and six varieties of wine. Jacob ably navigates the archival waters, describing a nation’s capital in transition, lobbying culture, and changes in America’s culinary landscape after the Civil War.

Ward’s method of epicurean persuasion proved successful. Distrust for lobbyists was rabid during one of the most fecund times in Washington, but Jacob makes the case that Ward’s style of social lobbying—trading on cuisine rather than cash—kept him aboveboard and, as a result, in the news. Investigated in an 1875 shipping scandal, Ward offered testimony to the House Ways and Means Committee: “I do not think money is ever wasted on a good dinner. If a man dines badly he forgets to say his prayers going to bed, but if he dines well he feels like a saint” (p. 122).

While many food lovers would ardently agree with that sentiment today, it’s not hard to imagine what a revelation it must have been in post–Civil War Washington, a town ripe for new ambitions and ready for more metropolitan pleasures. By plying politicians with one perfect meal after another, Ward helped build roads, railroads, and shipping routes—securing his place in history as one of the first lobbyists to wine and dine his way to the top.

—Rebecca Federman, New York Public Library

NOTE


Culinary Ephemera: An Illustrated History
William Woy’s Weaver
Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010
320 pp. Illustrations. $39.95 (cloth)

My biscotti recipe last night called for baking powder. Reaching for the familiar cylindrical tin, I realized that this ingredient’s packaging and typography have changed little over the past 150 years—Calumet, for example, still uses its original trademark, a Native American head. Modern baking powder, a chemical leavener, was invented in the mid-1800s. After intensive marketing to convince suspicious consumers of its purity and efficacy, it became popular in symbiosis with the cookstove, another industrial convenience. Encouraged by the temperance movement, which advised