Perhaps heirlooms are inevitably limited—for as Jordan notes, all food is “a vast current of germplasm, habit, memory, and intention … moving inexorably into the future” (p.214). Yet heirlooms have to be about more than just the pre-industrial diet; the moniker must acknowledge the complexity of where foods came from, and to whom they deliver meaning. “If our understanding of heirloom varieties has to do with food that pre-dates more industrialized and mechanized agriculture, and that bears a story of its past, then the concept of heirloom food in the United States must be more diverse” (p.206). Within all of this, Jordan acknowledges the painful truth that part of what makes heirlooms beautiful is their impermanence—but the memory of their flavor, and their origin stories, remain long after.

Jessica Carbone, Harvard University

The Politics of the Pantry: Stories, Food, and Social Change
Michael Mikulak
viii + 250 pp. Notes, Bibliography, and Index. $29.95 (hardcover)

The Politics of the Pantry explores the power behind how food stories are told, revealing their politics, assumptions, biases, and transformative potential. Writing from a cultural studies perspective, Michael Mikulak, a Postdoctoral Fellow at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and an aspiring small farmer, leads the reader through a forty-year history of environmentalism across the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States to draw out dominant narratives embedded within the industrial food complex. He focuses on the value of storytelling to show how narratives embody assumptions, often with radical consequences. The book’s goal: to demonstrate how through the “entanglement of narrative and practice” (p.88) storied food may emerge as an alternative value practice to capitalism.

The book is structured in three parts: (1) “The Nature of Capitalism,” (2) “Storied Food and the Transparent Meal,” and (3) “The Foodshed Memoir.” Part I investigates the value of nature within capitalism according to narratives of ecological modernization, techno-utopianism, and apocalypticism. Gore’s An Inconvenient Truth and Despommier’s vertical farm are examples of nature framed by science and technology, projecting visions of abundant, magical food futures. However, Mikulak also explains their drawbacks: overlooking the systemic roots of the problem, separating politics from science, and positioning nature as pure and external. He asks the reader to consider: Who would build, own, and operate such farms?

For apocalyptic narratives, Mikulak cites food anxieties surrounding food scares, obesity, and peak oil. Questions raised include the agency of the individual over planetary concerns, and how apocalyptic stories may halt the momentum for social change. Here too, Mikulak identifies the persuasiveness of the economic turn within a green consumerism that reduces the world to numbers, instead arguing for a polysemous nature, where food is understood to possess multiple meanings as an “entanglement of desire, pleasure, taste and politics” (p.12).

In the second part, “Storied Food” is divided into four genres: the Commodity Biography, the Nostalgic Pastoral, the Utopian Pastoral, and the Foodshed Memoir. Recognizing that industrial agriculture shapes food choices through an economic frame, Mikulak explores concepts of efficiency, green capitalism versus green economy, and the good life, to make visible what capital’s value practices have kept hidden. Twinkies are an example of a commodity biography, where the product represents the outcomes of material and metaphoric relationships between consumers and producers. Mikulak desires to reveal the hidden processes behind what we eat. He identifies two strains of pastoralism within storied food: nostalgic and utopian, where the former aligns with green capitalism, predicated on escape and romanticism, while the latter introduces concepts of alternative food networks and autonomous zones and practices to “open up spaces of alterity and critique” (p.111) to explore possibilities for change. Of these, one looks back, the other forward; one away from others, the other toward community. Utopian pastoralism strives to foster skills that break down mystifications of labor and urban-rural boundaries. Examples include Jamie at Home, River Cottage, and Slow Food that welcome urban agriculture and embrace taste education, situated pleasure, the shared table and conviviality, pushing forward a need for an embodied food politics.

The final part, “The Foodshed Memoir,” often takes the predominant form of storied food where authors transform their own engagement. Here, Mikulak also reflects and “ruminates” (p.129) on his experiences researching Slow Food and local food movements. While Mikulak acknowledges critiques about localism, his focus is on what participation does, inviting “readers to consider their own everyday lives and practices as embedded in various structures of knowledge, power, and everyday practices” (p.135). This section discusses concepts of biosocial production, co-production, and the agency of species, that explore the hybrid dynamics between humans and nature. Two examples stand out—the making of sauerkraut and sourdough—where Mikulak presents a delightful discussion on the temporal, sticky, and embodied sensations of growing wild yeast. Mikulak asserts that it is these new spaces of co-production rather than green capitalism that offer stories of hope, as it is crucial “to come up with alternative models of plenitude and pleasure that do not follow the consumerist path” (p.191).
Mikulak has produced a volume rich in concepts central to critical food studies. His diverse examples, language expression, and use of metaphors make this an accessible and enjoyable text. Politics in the Pantry would especially appeal to food scholar students who wish to develop a more nuanced, critical understanding of contemporary food issues. This book goes beyond description to critically analyze and reveal the politics hidden within industrial food narratives. It represents an essential step toward raising consciousness to challenge citizens’ everyday habits. In Mikulak’s own words: “We must strive to become the authors of our stories, rather than the spectators” (p.198).

Ferne Edwards, Trinity College Dublin

Fast Food: The Good, the Bad and the Hungry
Andrew F. Smith
London: Reaktion, 2016
224 pp. $19.95 (paper)

Andrew Smith’s Fast Food: The Good, the Bad and the Hungry reads just like how a fast food order should be processed—speedily and efficiently. And like a fast food meal, the book, with its streamlined prose and accessible content, can be swiftly consumed by a wide swath of the reading public.

Smith provides a succinct history of fast food, followed by six chapters titled “Globalization,” “Health,” “Marketing,” “Environment,” “Meat,” and “Labour,” and a concluding chapter called “The Future,” in which he prognosticates on the coming years in fast food, and offers recommendations the industry should undertake in areas such as nutrition, the environment, marketing, and labor.

Readers seeking a synthesis of the major social, environmental, public health, and political controversies surrounding fast food can find it in this book. Neophytes to fast food should have no trouble following the chapters, as Smith includes primers to all the major issues in fast food, and explains everything from what makes food halal to why Styrofoam containers are so harmful to the environment.

Smith’s argument is that the growth of the fast food industry has directly and indirectly resulted in the homogenization of diets worldwide, as well as health problems for frequent consumers of fast food, environmental degradation, labor abuses, dangerous working conditions, and underpaid workers. In response, fast food companies have responded with only “token” reforms, according to Smith. More often than not, the industry has “denied responsibility, blamed customers, castigated suppliers, opposed regulations and initiatives, funded sympathetic political candidates and organizations, sued opponents, blocked unionization and launched media blites in the face of negative publicity” (p.181).

But while the above quote is clearly strident in its critique of the fast food industry, the book as a whole does not read as a polemic, but as a reasoned assessment of an industry beset by major public relations challenges in the last few decades. In each of the six themed chapters, Smith explains a controversy in encyclopedic fashion, notes any reforms fast food companies have made, and asserts that the industry could do more to ameliorate the problem. The last paragraph of chapter 6 (“Meat”) is representative of Smith’s stance, as he concludes: “Fast-food corporations have taken micro-steps in the right directions, but they need to take more responsibility for controlling the unsustainable harm caused by their meat suppliers and improve the nutritional content of the beef, pork and chicken that they serve” (p.156). Smith’s summary of the controversy surrounding what the fast food industry calls “lean, finely textured beef” (LFTB)—colloquially known as “pink slime”—offers an example of his even-handed, fact-based approach: “Nothing dangerous had been uncovered by LFTB in the eight years it had been used,” he writes (pp.147–48).

The only somewhat confounding part of Fast Food comes in the concluding paragraph of the book, in which Smith places the onus on consumers to pressure the fast food industry to reform: “Ultimately consumers are responsible for what they—and their children—eat. Likewise citizens are responsible for the actions that they take—or fail to take—in political and policy arenas to improve fast food’s nutritional qualities, decrease its environmental harm, pay its workers a living wage, and stop it being marketed to children and adolescents” (p.184). This advice, commonsensical as it is, is a bit unexpected. Earlier in the book, Smith describes how fast food companies have adopted Big Tobacco’s playbook by seeking to hook consumers—including children—on their products; this would seem to imply that fast food marketing has compromised consumers’ volition. But perhaps Smith is just being a realist about the unlikely event of the fast food industry undertaking reforms without consumer pressure. The history of the industry certainly has not given him reason to believe otherwise.

Chin Jou, University of Sydney

Ten Restaurants That Changed America
Paul Freedman
New York: Liveright, 2016
xvi + 527 pp. Illustrations and photos. $35.00 (hardcover)

Somewhere between narcissism and naïveté resides humanity’s inability to historically orient itself. On one hand, many