

Connoisseurs of scholarly debates about the period will find plenty of delicacies, but Howe's arguments—America really is an “exceptional” nation, for example—are submerged in his masterly narrative. Even at more than 800 pages, this book is somehow still a marvel of compression, with vast amounts of scholarship integrated into a vivid history that shows Americans their nation in all its greatness, and its occasional squalor.

STEVEN LAGERFELD is the editor of *The Wilson Quarterly*.

Eating Our Words

Reviewed by Tim Morris

WHILE I WAS READING ANN Vileisis's *Kitchen Literacy*, I bought a pie pumpkin at a supermarket in Arlington, Texas. Its tiny label asserted no fewer than five times that the pumpkin was organic, invoking both the USDA and the Oregon Tilth, and it came with a return address in LaFarge, Wisconsin. The label also informed me that the pumpkin—or perhaps its parent company—was “independent & farmer owned.”

Two hundred years ago, Ann Vileisis observes, I might have grown that pumpkin myself. A hundred years ago, I might have met its grower in a farmers' market and known enough about horticulture to discuss how it was raised. Fifty years ago, supermarkets would have taken pains to conceal the pumpkin's provenance. Today, we know more about our food supply than at any time in the last century. We read labels to learn where our food comes from; we read books to interpret the labels.

Vileisis goes back to primary sources—diaries,

cookbooks, print advertisements, government documents, and news stories—to trace American food epistemology from the early Republic to the present day. She does her best work in recovering the mid-20th century, that fast-receding era when knowledge of food was lost most quickly and definitively. *Kitchen Literacy* gives us a keen sense of why big canners, dairies, meatpackers, and grocers of the post-World War II period didn't want us to know what was making its way into our food—chemical preservatives and pesticides, as well as artificial extenders, conditioners, flavors, and colors—and how they kept that knowledge from us.

But food illiteracy was not foisted on an abject public. We didn't want to know the life history of our vegetables; we were content to let the Jolly Green Giant worry about that. Vileisis acknowledges the power of our mothers' and grandmothers' desire for clean-looking, reliable food. Grandma wasn't trying to poison us with chemical cake mixes, after all. Quite the opposite: She was aiming for safety and consistent quality. “The bride who takes advantage of canned and frozen foods, packaged mixes too, need not apologize,” assured a 1950 article in *Good Housekeeping* aimed at novice cooks. “She's smart.”

What Grandma didn't know, though, could have killed us. Fear of poison was finally strong enough to overcome Americans' reluctance to worry about their victuals. Vileisis charts the growing public and legislative concern during the 1950s and '60s about possible carcinogens in the food supply, and the accumulation of DDT in the

bodies of those who ate from it. This story

has been told before—notably, in

Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*

and Deborah Koons Garcia's

film *The Future of Food*—

but Vileisis situates it in

the larger context of a

loss and recovery of

food literacy. Neither as

activist as *In Defense of Food* author Michael Pol-

lan nor as belligerent as Barbara Kingsolver in

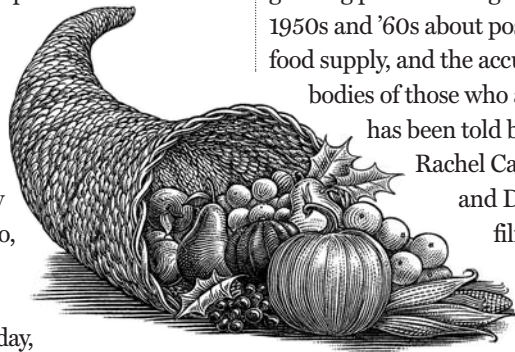
Animal, Vegetable, Miracle, Vileisis still hails

from their wing of food politics, striving to know

KITCHEN LITERACY:

How We Lost Knowledge of Where Food Comes From and Why We Need to Get It Back.

By Ann Vileisis. Island Press. 332 pp. \$26.95



more about her meals and to grow what ingredients she can herself. "I have no delusions about my dependence on the larger food system," she writes. But she remains "troubled by a nagging awareness that much of my food depends on distant, unknowable farms and cheap petroleum."

When I baked my "independent & farmer owned" pumpkin into a pie, the resulting dessert was stringy and tasteless. But I felt good about eating it. I wonder, after reading *Kitchen Literacy*, if I am much different from my grandmother. She opened cans of processed, residue-laden pumpkin and felt good about her predictable pies because the labels promised garden freshness. I open an indie pumpkin and feel good about the parlous results because the label promises sustainable human happiness. We differ mainly in our reading tastes.

TIM MORRIS teaches English at the University of Texas at Arlington and frequently writes about food.

History Writ Small

Reviewed by Aviya Kushner

FOR ONE MONTH IN 1936, my grandfather worked in a bar in Bremen, Germany. The owner of that bar, who was not Jewish, risked plenty to pay my teenage grandfather for drying glasses and sweeping the floor. Decades later, he did my grandfather another favor, telling a committee in Bremen, "Yes, I knew Zigmund Traum. He worked for me in my bar. On this and this date." Because of that testimony, my grandfather received reparation checks for the rest of his life. The money could not compensate for the murders of two parents and four brothers, but it was an acknowledgment of what had happened.

Such small episodes—my grandfather's month of illegal work, the bar owner's walk to the reparation committee's headquarters—are part of the Holocaust's history, too. In *Good*

Neighbors, Bad Times, Mimi Schwartz tells the stories "that history has no time for as it paints the broad brush strokes of the past." These stories take place in Benheim (Schwartz changed the name), the German farming community where her father was born in 1898, when half the town's 1,200 residents were Jewish.

After he emigrated to Queens in 1937, Schwartz's father insisted that once his hometown "was the best place for Jews!" At the same time, he spent hours on the phone persuading others to help him in efforts to assist Jews still stuck in Hitler's Germany to leave, and fast. Schwartz, a professor emerita of the writing program at Richard Stockton College in New Jersey, takes us into the kitchens and gathering places of Germans and Jews alike, accepting drinks, cakes, and stories, in an effort to separate truth from lies in her father's account of good neighbors in a German village.

A hand-typed article by her father that she discovers tucked in an old file after his death describes life in the village before Hitler, when it was common practice for neighbors to help each other with feeding the chickens, milking the cows, and stoking coal. Orthodox Jewish residents who commuted by train to Pforzheim regularly converted one car into a prayer car, Schwartz's father wrote, "much to the astonishment of Christian travelers. No one shied away from laying tefillin [leather boxes Orthodox men strap on their arms and heads during morning prayers]; one prayed as if one were in a synagogue."

But as the Nazis' power grew during the 1930s, many Benheim Jews fled. After her father's death, Schwartz seeks them out to learn what happened in the place they left behind. In Israel, she hears about Benheim Christians who rescued a Torah during Kristallnacht in 1938. From survivors in Vermont, she learns that there

A Jewish daughter tells stories of Benheim, the German farming village where her father was born in 1898.

GOOD NEIGHBORS, BAD TIMES:

Echoes of My Father's German Village.

By Mimi Schwartz.
Univ. of Nebraska Press.
279 pp. \$24.95