Have the French always enjoyed their renowned cuisine? When did Russians begin to eat pirogi? What was the first Indonesian spice to be cultivated elsewhere in the world? Questions such as these make for good Jeopardy material, but they're far from trivial--just ask anyone with a passion for good food and a curiosity for where that food originated. That person will know instinctively that the best way to approach a culture--and, indeed, the human animal--is through the stomach. For this individual, The Cambridge World History of Food will be something of a bible, and the best of gifts. A massive scholarly tome in two volumes and more than 2,000 pages, the CWHF encompasses a wealth of learning that touches on nearly every aspect of human life. (It also reveals the answers to the three earlier questions: No, French cuisine as we know it is a 19th-century development; in the 16th century, following the conquest of the Volga Tatar; ginger, in colonial Mexico.) Thoroughly researched and highly accessible despite its formidable layout, the set addresses a groaning board of topics past and present, from the diet of prehistoric humans to the role of iron in combating disease; from the domestication of animals to the spread of once-isolated ethnic cuisines in a fast-globalizing world. Of greatest interest to general readers is its concluding section--a dictionary of the world's food plants, which gives brief accounts of items both common and exotic, from abalone to Zuttano avocado. The product of seven years of research, writing, and editing on the part of more than 200 authors, The Cambridge World History of Food promises to become a standard reference for social scientists, economists, nutritionists, and other scholars--and for cooks and diners seeking to deepen their knowledge of the materials they use and consume. --Gregory McNamee

My Personal Review:
Part of the dissatisfaction among some reviewers is that this book is not a light, cheerful cook-book/dictionary. For those who want something more along those lines, there are plenty of light-weight volumes that purport to tell the story of this or that cooking tradition with lots of nice glossy pictures.
and maybe more than three accurate facts if you're really lucky. Try Jane and Michael Stern's road trip food voyages for example. This two volume set is not for the faint of heart. It is a book for the enthusiast and the professional food historian alike: people who are looking for the social, biological and historical context to the food they enjoy. It is not completely encyclopaedic and there are a few inaccuracies in the identification of plant names and such but these are minor quibbles in the face of the sheer comprehensiveness of the work and the undoubted scholarly care that has gone into its preparation. I for one appreciated the early chapters on the archaeology of food. People tend to forget the time depth that surrounds eating as a human activity. This is not surprising in a modern world that emphasizes fast food over aesthetics or knowledge. It's my observation that those who are most interested in food purely as a consumable item seem to have little interest in where it really comes from. For example, one of the great tragedies of modern industrial living is the increasing absence of knowledge of or even respect for the fact that real animals died to provide you with your McChicken Burger, or your Poached Sole in Tuscan Orange Sauce. This book is an invaluable reference. I recommend it to all my students in my Anthropology of Food and Eating class, and I myself use it all the time. The Oxford Companion to Food is also a fine volume, and while it is sometimes more useful with regard to specific foods, it is much lighter on analysis and unnecessarily flippant in places. I would recommend that you buy both the Cambridge volumes and the OCF. Together they almost completely fill the reference spot on the bookshelf of the serious student of food. To dine well is to touch the face of God.