

Gastronomy: Food Literature that Enlightens and Informs

Like many women of her generation, my grandmother pledges her culinary allegiance to those influential figures of the 1960s and 70s, including people like Julia Child, James Beard, and Craig Claiborne. Dinners at her house are always a treat, usually featuring something rich and savory that is redolent of aromatics like thyme, garlic, and red wine. I became interested in cooking by her example, and I began amassing a somewhat random assortment of cookbooks and food magazine subscriptions at a young age. I was in the fifth grade when my grandmother gave me my first historical cookery book, *The Original White House Cook Book, 1887 Edition*. Though perhaps an esoteric choice for an eleven-year-old, containing old-fashioned recipes for things like pickled chicken and “Topsy Charlotte,” I poured over the pages of this book. My captivation was acute to the extent that I was endearingly compelled to write and illustrate a short story about a young girl employed in the White House kitchen in the year 1888. The tale ends with the earnest but kitchen-clumsy protagonist impressing President Cleveland himself with her triumphant rendition of Marble Cake. It was *The Original White House Cook Book* that introduced me to the study of the connection between food and culture. The ongoing, recurrent need for food is essentially biological, but the act of eating carries far more than nutritional meaning or epicurean delight. Food has been described as a “highly condensed social fact,” and the numerous spheres in which it interacts with culture allow for inquiry into a variety of disciplines, such as philosophy, economy, archaeology, anthropology, and history. Though I still purchase the occasional guilty pleasure cookbook, full of beautiful photography and trendy recipes, my book collection focuses on food literature with an academic, scholarly bent or that informs a historical/anthropological perspective. My interest in food is both visceral and academic.

My collection can currently be divided into the following categories: anthologies and references, culinary history, dining etiquette and customs, ethical eating, influential food writers, and timeless cookbooks. Though each book is informative in its own way, some are essential. My grandmother's well-used, copy of *Larousse Gastronomique*, the first English edition, is a thorough encyclopedia of cooking techniques, ingredients, and recipes, mainly stemming from the French tradition. Beyond sentimental value, this resource provides the answer to many gastronomic questions, as well as demonstrating the weighty integration of the French food culture into English-speaking nations. Johns Hopkins professor Sidney Mintz's groundbreaking work on sugar and capitalism in *Sweetness and Power* is a superb example of single-substance studies, which aim to investigate specific food items and their impact on politics, economics, and culture. Similar extensive studies have been conducted on commodities like salt, milk, the potato, and the tomato. Professor Mintz' work is fascinating for its historical content, but it is also important for the method it suggests to scholars wishing to study food. William Grimes' *Appetite City* and Molly O'Neill's *New York Cookbook* touch on a very specific interest of mine, and I am in the process of applying for a grant to research food and music in mid nineteenth century New York City. Elizabeth David's writing is a delight. Her work is often stern and scholarly in her attempts to inform reluctant, stubborn Englanders about other cuisines, but her true love of food subtly and powerfully shines through in her writing. David changed and diversified the culinary landscape of England while elevating the standard of food writing in the twentieth century. Whether interested in culinary history, English history, or simply cooking excellent food, I cannot imagine a collection without Elizabeth David.

I have many ideas for expanding my collection. I am chiefly interested in furthering my understanding of the methodology behind studying food. To this extent, I will need more anthropological and historical works on food. There are several key authors I am missing, notably Jack Goody and Audrey Richards, whose names appear in the bibliographies of many of the books in my

current collection. I would like to acquire more literature on England's culinary history, which has been thoroughly and richly documented, despite the country's reputation for abysmal food. It would be wonderful to have more primary resources, such as *The Forme of Cury* or *The Original White House Cook Book*. Cookbooks from the past speak so much to the times in which they were written. Expanding my collection of commentary on etiquette and dining, especially in Eastern cultures, is also a priority. I would like to be able to say that I know how to study food, and that I have a diverse set of excellent and important examples of how it has been done.

Anthologies, encyclopedias, and references:

1. Montagne, Prosper. *Larousse Gastronomique: The Encyclopedia of Food, Wine & Cookery*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1961.

From absinth to zwieback, an excellent and exhaustive resource, containing pictures, cross-references, and detailed descriptions of food from many cuisines, from French master Prosper Montagne.

2. Reinhart, Peter. *The Bread Baker's Apprentice*. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2001.

Scientific and detailed instructions on bread making, including explanations of bread's place in many different cultures. Peter Reinhart arguably knows more about bread—how to make it and what it means--than anyone else in the world.

3. *Secret Ingredients: The New Yorker Book of Food and Drink*. Ed. David Remnick. New York: Random House, 2007.

An enjoyable collection of fiction and non-fiction pieces on food that have appeared in *The New Yorker* and a telling example of how food has made its way into American media.

Culinary history:

4. Brillat-Savarin, Jean Anthelme. *The Physiology of Taste or Transcendental Gastronomy*. Trans. Fayette Robinson. Champaign: Book Jungle, 2009.

An 1825 philosophical treatise on cooking, eating, and health from a self-proclaimed gourmand. Here is the origin of the famous line, "Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are." Considered essential to any gastronomic library.

5. Freeman, Margaret. *Herbs for the Mediaeval Household*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1971.

A description of the diverse roles played by herbs in the domestic life of Medieval Europeans. Unusual and fascinating historical lore.

6. Gillette, P. L. *The Original White House Cook Book, 1887 Edition*. Ottenheimer Publishers, 1999.

Unedited and set in its original type, this is the White House's cookbook as it was read in 1887. Though over a century after the American Revolution, the recipes interestingly highlight the lingering English influence on American dining. Pictures, menus, and comments on seasonable eating, etiquette, and household cleaning are included.

7. Grimes, William. *Appetite City: A Culinary History of New York*. New York: North Point Press, 2009.

A comprehensive history of dining in what is now considered a culinary Mecca. Grimes covers both public and private dining and gives detailed descriptions of New York City food markets.

8. Mintz, Sidney W. *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. New York: Penguin Books, 1985.

Sidney Mintz offers a provocative thesis on sugar and capitalism and comments on the uncertain future of anthropology.

9. Kurlansky, Mark. *Salt: A World History*. New York: Penguin Books, 2002.

Noted food scholar Mark Kurlansky offers a single-substance study on salt and its momentous effect on world history.

10. Roden, Claudia. *The Book of Jewish Food*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008.

Claudia Roden offers a treasure trove of over 800 revamped and tested recipes, but more significantly integrates anecdotes, history, and cultural tidbits both from her travels and her research. An example of how revealing food can be of a people's way of life.

Dining etiquette:

11. Beeton, Isabella. *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Mrs. Beeton produced this volume in 1861 when she was twenty-two years old. It is considered a classic of Victorian literature that did much to form middle-class identities. An English historical treasure full of recipes and rules on dining and housekeeping.

12. Vanderbilt, Amy. *Etiquette*. New York: Doubleday & Company, 1972.

The grand dame of gracious living weighs in on how to eat and what to serve in mid-twentieth century America, including a chapter on living without servants. Ms Vanderbilt's writing is informative and unintentionally ironic.

Ethical eating:

13. Pollan, Michael. *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. New York: Penguin Books, 2006.

Pollan looks at the history of dining with concerns of ethics and sustainability, concluding that there are deep and damaging consequences to the way most Americans eat today.

14. Safran Foer, Jonathan. *Eating Animals*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009.

Delving into philosophy, literature, and history, Jonathan Safran Foer discusses his personal struggle with ethics and morality of consuming meat products. His study incorporates scholarly research as well as fieldwork.

15. Waters, Alice. *Chez Panisse Vegetables*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996.

Alice Waters is the champion of sustainable food production. Her restaurant in Berkeley, California was one of the first to headline the significance of eating organic produce, prepared simply and thoughtfully, and the positive effects this practice has on health and the environment.

Influential food writers:

16. Beard, James. *American Cookery*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2010.

In a culture that is often accused of not having a true cuisine, James Beard is the voice of American food. His words are considered gospel by many food writers and helped to define the culinary landscape of America today. Many of his recipes were written over fifty years ago, and they are still excellent. His recipe for tomato pie is perfect.

17. Colwin, Laurie. *Home Cooking*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993.

The late Laurie Colwin wrote short pieces about cooking and eating with warmth and intelligence. She ushered in a new wave of American cooking, one that aimed toward pleasure and simplicity rather than impressive or complicated techniques. An interesting look at the changing American domestic scene.

18. David, Elizabeth. *South Wind Through the Kitchen: The Best of Elizabeth David*. New York: North Point Press, 1998.

Elizabeth David, the great British food writer of the twentieth century, writes with the precision of a scholar and the sincerity of a true gastronome. Her works are treasures for historians, writers, and cooks alike.

19. Fisher, M. F. K. *The Art of Eating*. Hoboken: Wiley, 2004.

M. F. K. Fisher is the model to which many food writers aspire. Her writing exhibits that rare combination of being both enjoyable and informative. This book is a collection of essays on food and eating that are often historical in nature. Fisher has a way of inspiring genuine interest in a subject matter that could be considered mundane.

20. Greenspan, Dorie. *Around My French Table*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010. Dorie Greenspan, an American living in Paris, is a respected food author, delivering flawless recipes and thoughtful commentary on the historical and cultural relevance of the food she loves to make. Her work is a companion in the kitchen and another interesting example of the American obsession with French food.

21. Nathan, Joan. *An American Folklife Cookbook*. New York: Schocken Books, 1984.

Joan Nathan is a prolific author and food scholar who has written extensively on how Americans eat. She has also produced multiple books on Jewish food and on modern Israeli cooking. She is to be noted for the extensive fieldwork that goes into each of her books.

Timeless cookbooks:

22. Boyce, Kim. *Good to the Grain: Baking with Whole-Grain Flours*. New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 2010.

Though newly released, this book is surely to become classic. It highlights America's strong new interest in whole-grain living and the revival of using archaic, healthful, and sustainable ingredients.

23. Carrarini, Rose. *Breakfast, Lunch, Tea*. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2006.

The improbable account of an English chef opening a successful café in Paris, this book is full of beautiful photography and hybrid Anglo-Franco recipes. An interesting look at how food cultures merge into one another.

24. Child, Julia, Louisette Bertholle, and Simone Beck. *Mastering the Art of French Cooking, Vol. 1*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001.

The classic and monumental effort of Julia Child. This book revolutionized American cooking and immortalized the French tradition.

25. Cordero-Cordell, Teresa, and Robert Cordell. *Aprovecho: A Mexican-American Border Cookbook*. New York: Hippocrene Books, 2007.

More of a sentimental addition, this book highlights the cuisine that can be found in my hometown of El Paso, Texas. This book is a true insight into border culture.

26. Heatter, Maida. *Maida Heatter's Book of Great Desserts*. New York: Random House, 1991.

Maida Heatter introduced American kitchens to a world of baking traditions in the twentieth century. She is to be noted for the longevity of her recipes and the interest she stirred in new cuisines.

27. Kennedy, Diana. *My Mexico*. New York: Clarkson Potter, 1998.

Diana Kennedy is the authority on Mexican food, with a focus on regionality. She also incorporates historical and cultural commentary.

28. O'Neill, Molly. *New York Cookbook*. New York: Workman Publishing, 1992.

An epic example of an intriguing genre: the regional cookbook. O'Neill's work is full of painstakingly researched culinary history and intimate portraits of the people who make up the diverse city of New York.

29. Rosso, Julee, and Sheila Lukins. *Silver Palate Cookbook*. New York: Workman Publishing Company, 2007.

A perfect snapshot of American dining in the 1980s. Rosso and Lukins taught the baby-boomer generation how to cook.

Wish list:

1. Davidson, Alan. *The Oxford Companion to Food, Second Edition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

This book is twenty years in the making. It is an exhaustive dictionary of all things gastronomic, and a modern, more thorough expansion on *Larousse Gastronomique*.

2. Goody, Jack. *Cooking, Cuisine and Class*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Jack Goody's book is essentially a work of social science that tackles the question of 'haute cuisine.' This book would do much to expand my understanding of the methodology of food studies.

3. Grigson, Jane. *English Food*. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.

Jane Grigson is another important historian of English food. She is mentioned in many of the books on English food in my current collection.

4. Jaffrey, Madhur. *World-of-the-East Vegetarian Cooking*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981.

A product of legendary editor Judith Jones, Madhur Jaffrey is the author of several timeless cookbooks and another profound influence on American cooking.

5. Lewis, Edna. *A Taste of Country Cooking*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976.

Also working with Judith Jones, Edna Lewis writes on the "country" food she grew up eating in a town settled by freed slaves. Subtle social commentary, superb writing, and a tribute to a type of American cooking that many fear is becoming lost.

6. Maurizio, Adam. *Histoire de l'alimentation végétale depuis la préhistoire jusqu'à nos jours*. Paris, 1932.

This obscure work on the history of vegetables would be an excellent reference and a reason to practice my French translation.

7. Mendelson, Anne. *Milk: The Surprising Story of Milk Through the Ages*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008.

Anne Mendelson is a culinary historian I worked with briefly in the summer of 2010. Her recent book on the history of milk has met much critical acclaim, and would bolster my collection of single-substance studies.

8. Pegge, Samuel. *The Forme of Cury: A Roll of Ancient English Cookery Compiled about A.D. 1390*. BiblioBazaar, 2006

This is a primary source of King Richard's favorite dishes from the fourteenth century. This book is considered indispensable to scholars of English culinary history. I am also interested to read Samuel Pegge's introduction and to see how the book is formatted.

9. Richards, Audrey L. *Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia*. James Currey, 1995.

Audrey Richards is considered one of the foremost students of food anthropology, and her work figures largely into Mintz's *Sweetness and Power*.

10. Salaman, Redcliffe. *The History and Social Influence of the Potato*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Redcliffe Salaman wrote one of the other important works on single substances. The humble potato carries great historical weight.