

"Delicious. . . . *Domesticity* nourishes the senses and the soul."

—*New York Times Book Review*

# DOMESTICITY

A GASTRONOMIC INTERPRETATION OF LOVE



**BOB SHACOCHIS**

Winner of the National Book Award

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## Praise for *Domesticity*

“Take M. F. K. Fisher’s sublimely sensual writings on food, add a liberal dose of testosterone and dollop of twisted humor, and you’ve got a good idea of the quirky style of Bob Shacochis’s delicious *Domesticity*.... It is more than just the record of a passionate cook’s culinary adventures. Mr. Shacochis uses food as a medium to investigate all sorts of human appetites, inventions and connections. He ponders the history of breakfast, the social significance of ice cream, the relative value of table manners and the pleasures of the dinner party.... *Domesticity* nourishes the senses and the soul.”

— *New York Times Book Review*

“By turns dotting, curative, seductive.... Its celebration of the cook’s greatest need—the significant eater—rings sweetly true.”

— *Washington Post*

“Shacochis follows his nose to investigate such ‘gastronomic riddles’ as the nomenclature of pâtés and terrines and the aphrodisiac reputations of various foods.... Shacochis is literate, tough, romantic and the master of his kitchen.”

— *Publishers Weekly*

“*Domesticity* is about the voluptuous pleasures of cooking for, and eating with, someone you love about making meals a participatory rather than spectator sport. It is about excess and obsession. Shacochis intends to reinvent our relationship to food—in much the same way that he has worked over [the] years, to reinvent the notion of romance.”

— *Los Angeles Times*

“The value of Shacochis’ book rests in the best of its artful telling. When he describes food as ‘one of the ways we have of locating ourselves, of telling ourselves where we are, both physically and emotionally,’ the reader suspects that this is the secret key to his far-ranging essays.”

— *Chicago Tribune*

“A modern autobiographical cookbook ... Dedicated to the principle that the head, heart, and taste buds are all interwoven, the recipes go well beyond formulas—they are instead expressions of mood, setting, and lifestyle. A versatile addition to most collections, this book could just as easily be shelved next to Calvin Trillin as Julia Child.”

— *Library Journal*

“Food, sex, and other thoughts.... The writing—polished, clever, and aptly targeted.”

— *Kirkus Reviews*

“Scoundrels make good subjects, and though at times you might want to reach across the page and cuff Shacochis, you can’t help but forgive him, and continue feasting on the light but well-seasoned

fare he has to offer.”

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— *San Francisco Review of Books*

“These vibrant, offbeat, and sensual essays on the importance of food in the daily affairs of interesting, idiosyncratic men and women who know their way around kitchens combine an enthusiastic storyteller’s love of narrative with an enthusiastic cook’s love of fresh ingredients.”

— *Entertainment Weekly*

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# DOMESTICITY

*A Gastronomic Interpretation of Love*

BOB SHACOCHIS

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BOB SHACOCHIS is a novelist, essayist, journalist, and educator. A former contributing editor for *Harper's* and *Outside*, Shacochis currently teaches in the graduate writing programs at Bennington College and Florida State University. Among his works are the short story collections *Easy in the Islands* and *The Next New World*; the novel *Swimming in the Volcano*, a finalist for the National Book Award; *Domesticity*, a collection of essays about food and love; *Between Heaven and Hell*, a travel memoir of his journeys in the Himalaya; and, most recently, the novel *The Woman Who Lost Her Soul*. *The Immaculate Invasion*, about the 1994 military intervention in Haiti, was a finalist for the New Yorker Magazine Literary Awards and a New York Times Notable Book. Shacochis's work has received a National Book Award for First Fiction, the Rome Prize in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship. His op-ed commentaries on the U.S. military, Haiti, and Florida politics have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. He lives in Florida and New Mexico with Ms. They have been together for thirty-eight years.

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*For my editors: Granger, Kathy, and Judy;  
and the Big Guy, Art.*

*For my friends Scott and Captain Tay.*

*And for that Other Girl, what's-her-name.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Miss F. and I live together, and seem to have made a habit of it—for better or worse, but always under the obligation not to destroy each other, as is too often the style in the modern art relationships. This all began in the mid-70s, when she first moved in with me. I was twenty-four years old. Miss F. had just turned an extraordinarily tenacious twenty-three, a miraculous age where she would remain for many years. I remember that, at the time, the air surrounding us felt pressurized with the understanding, held in common between us, that we had more or less been catapulted into love. Yet as far as I was concerned, this was not a big deal and certainly no cause for alarm. This happened on a regular basis among people our age—it was like still another dress rehearsal for the future, the time in our thirty-something dotage when we would weary of lust and romance and actually chance a commitment, essentially placing the gun of adulthood to our youth-crazed brains and pulling the trigger, leaving us with no other choice but to pursue that most dire and numbing of social actions called *settling down*.

Clearly, some men arise from their cradles as ready-made bureaucrats of love, and these are the ones who, at the earliest opportunity, march straight ahead toward the barn of domesticity, the hallowed shelter of tradition where they will be adequately fed and fattened, where the alluring scene of greener pastures gradually fades into oblivion. I could be appreciative of this breed—so vital to the preservation of what little's left of what used to be referred to as the American Way—without wanting to emulate them. As for myself, I held no intention of settling down or even simmering down: I much preferred life in proximity to the boiling point.

What were you supposed to settle down into anyway, I wanted to know. Tranquility? (What was that? I never even liked quaaludes in college.) Complacency? Boredom? Inertia? Brooding? permanent state of annoyance?

Mowing the lawn?

Intertribal warfare among the neighbors?

Cornflakes? Canned soup? Iceberg lettuce? Tuna fish casseroles?

Just forget it. Boyhood gone to seed. No word in the domestic lexicon was more self-explanatory than *wedlock*. As I said, I loved Miss F. but wasn't about to throw out the anchor on our relationship since love, like a car built in Detroit, was not meant to last. Everybody knew that.

At the time, I did the right thing, or at least the only proper thing a gentleman could do, and promptly suggested to Miss F. that she was entering into an association with the wrong guy; that, by falling in love with me and moving in and then allowing the whole affair to canter along, week after week, she was making a mistake of a proportion that would ultimately have to be categorized as whopping. My caveat raised the issue of cake, that great euphemism for male appetites: I wanted to have my cake, of course, just as much as I desired to eat it, and if I had my ravenous way, I was going to be the one who baked it too, over and over again, experimenting with an epicurean variety of recipes, until I was cake-stuffed, blind with frosting, and could say in truth that I had had my fill—a process that one suspected, if not prayed, might take forever.

*Settling down* was deadly anathema to us boys with our cakes. Only the bourgeoisie ever really settled down, like flecks of precipitate drifting to the bottom of society's beaker to lie for eternity.



title, something along the lines of *An Alphabet of Red-Hot Babes* or *Paris Redux: The Sober Years*; something that had the heavyweight reek of my intimacy with power, like *Fidel and Me*, for example, or a paean to testosterone, like *Rafting the Buthalezi*.

Instead, here I am signing on with *Domesticity*, which is a book about relationships and food and dogs, about the gastronomic aesthetic and love and love's language, about friendship and laughter and anger and the distances that often separate us, about cooking and snobs and sorrow and writing and secrets, and about who's going to do the dishes, since it isn't going to be me. This is an unexpected right turn in my literary life, back toward the middle of the road, and, I must say, quite a terrible shock. In some ways, this is my personal tragedy as a guy, and the end of the fling others have imagined for me with the Cult of Ernesto, though I remain, as the *New York Times Book Review* once suggested, free, white, and hairy-chested.

Perhaps I should have anticipated the in-house response to my domestic meditations—they have, upon occasion, made Miss F. very nervous; they have made her gulp, made her furious, made her laugh herself and me and us, and once in a blue moon, they have, I confess, hurt her, because, of course, my experience of *our* life has not always been hers—and yet she has never asked me to alter my perspective in order to paint a more comfortable public image of her or us, or who I think she is, or who I imagine we are, at any given moment. I suppose I also should have anticipated a certain out-of-house response to writing a book, however personal, with recipes in it, and yet when I've encountered it over and over again, I always found it baffling, and stupidly rude.

Take, for instance, the winter season, 1989–90. Miss F. and I were implanted among the self-anointed mandarins of high culture at the American Academy. Remembering them brings to mind Robert Hughes' phrase, "pale patriarchal penis people." Gilded incarceration would adequately describe the context of our tenure there—we were elite prisoners in the Palace of Negligence and Affectation—and it turned out to be the most horrible year of our lives, the only time, in time unending, that our relationship threatened to undo itself. (More about that later, although Miss F. advises me that my retelling of our unhappiness there is unfair to her—only half the story ... and so on.)

We lived at the mercy of the Academy's director, the Boring Meany, and his high-strung vindictive French wife, Her Royal Awfulness, both of whom had dedicated themselves to winning the great class war of snobbery being waged among the Americans, and anybody else who got in the way.

On the nasty little occasion of which I speak, Her Royal Awfulness, in need of a project less tiring than her hourly harassment of the kitchen staff, was inspired to host something akin to a freshman mixer in the *salon*, and so invited over the snoots from the French Academy to rub *vitae* with the snoots at our American one. It promised, as did most events at the Academy, to be an exquisitely cutthroat affair.

By the time I exited our freezing cell on the Academy's second floor, the soiree was in full dyspeptic swing. I paused on the marble staircase that led to the salon, so that from my temporarily elevated position I might survey the beautiful people below, inhale the genius they exuded, and tremble with anticipation at the prospect of my communion among them. Then, I descended, spotting Her Awfulness, who had also seen me; she made a summoning gesture, as is frequently the case among her tribe, and I obeyed, which is not always the case among the tribe of barbarians I call my own.

I weaved through the crowd, saying hello to this backstabber or that imposter; greeting the Marxist art historian wearing a \$250 pair of designer shoes; the illiterate artist who, in his brilliance, created

outrageously expensive prints of monosyllabic words after he had looked them up in the dictionary learn how they were spelled. Finally, I stood side by side with Her Awfulness, herself encircled by a coterie of nattily dressed Parisians—three men and a young woman—each with arched eyebrows and that particular smirk of arrogance that makes the French so beloved by your run-of-the-mill gring. These were the French writers, my counterparts, all four of them acclaimed novelists and recipients of the Prix de France, which I understand in France is actually an honor.

“Here is Robert,” announced Her Royal Awfulness, meaning me. She could barely conceal the wicked pleasure she seemed to take in her identification of me. “He writes cookbooks,” she said.

Perhaps it goes without saying that, after such a warm and generous introduction, and despite the gastronomic passions of the French, not a one of them had a word, kind or otherwise, to say to me throughout the evening. The anecdote is self-evident and requires no further interpretation, so I’ll take my leave, for the time being, of the Academy’s treacherous halls, to beg entrance into the infinitely more civilized and compassionate world of M. F. K. Fisher, whom I think of, would like to think of, with all humility, as the guardian angel of this book. In her foreword to *The Gastronomical Me*, Fisher wrote:

“People ask me: Why do you write about food, and eating and drinking? Why don’t you write about the struggle for power and security, and about love, the way others do?”

“They ask it accusingly, as if I were somehow gross, unfaithful to the honor of my craft.

“The easiest answer is to say that, like most other humans, I am hungry. But there is more than that. It seems to me that our three basic needs, for food and security and love, are so mixed and mingled and entwined that we cannot straightly think of one without the others. So it happens that when I write of hunger, I am really writing about love and the hunger for it, and warmth and the love of it and the hunger for it ... and then the warmth and richness and fine reality of hunger satisfied. and it is all one.”

I plead guilty to both the sensibility and the hunger—literally. And my hunger, as it so often does with one’s life, given the opportunity, changed me, made me both an exemplary wife and, I suppose, and to no one’s surprise, a lousy husband. More significantly though, the hunger widened my literary horizon in a manner I never imagined or expected.

Five years ago, when the criminally inebriated editors at *GQ* magazine asked me to become the new “Dining In” columnist, when I stopped guffawing, I did what George Bush so frequently accuses Bill Clinton of always doing—I waffled. The offer from *GQ* was actually a matter of coincidence: the fiction editor at the magazine had invited me to send him some of my novel then in progress. The chapter I submitted contained a scene in which the male character cooks an elaborate dinner highlighted by a planked striped bass roasted over an open fire, for the woman he’s romancing. At the same time, *GQ*’s former Dining In columnist threw in his apron, and word went out around the editorial offices, “Does anyone know anybody who can write about food?”

The fiction editor believed he did. My dinner scene was photocopied and passed around; in desperation, the senior editors agreed the column was mine, if I wanted it. One of them telephoned to see what I’d say. I said, not quite emphatically, *No*. I said I probably wasn’t the person they were looking for. The writing I had read about food, unless authored by the likes of Fisher or A. J. Liebling or Calvin Trillin, struck me as exceedingly boring, pea-brained, pretentious, faddish, rife with the worst sort of classism, devoted to the most anemic forms of *joie de vivre*, et cetera. It wasn’t even lively enough, on its own terms, to turn my stomach.

The editor said, *Fine*. She said, Write about anything you want, in any style you fancy, *only tag a recipe onto the end of it*. I thought she was genuinely out of her mind and told myself maybe I should

take advantage of this condition before she comes to her senses. She didn't seem to realize that I was a fiction writer, that I made things up out of thin air, that I embellished facts according to whimsy, plus I had political and social axes to grind, and that I had a sense of humor others found, to say it politely, inappropriate, or that I was the kind of guy who would likely use the column to thumb my nose at the insipid elitism embodied by gastronomic literature as it is standardly practiced. (It was the insipidness that riled me, not especially the elitism, since elitism in the service of creative excellence could hardly be called a vice.)

Or that I couldn't separate, intellectually or emotionally, how I cooked from how I lived, which was problematic, since how I lived with my common-law wife, Miss F., was not exactly natural material for mass consumption, and the text of the column, more often than not, would evolve out of the complexities of a contemporary though pointedly alternative life-style where the man remained home (that is, when he deigned to be in town) and the woman went out into the world each morning (and wasn't allowed to return until after five). A column about the domestic landscape, as experienced by a couple with a very shoddily drawn domestic map, who were indifferent about orthodoxy and could care less, frankly, about the traditional roles society assigns to gender.

Miss F. and I had just moved from the Outer Banks of North Carolina to Florida, where she was to begin law school at Florida State University. We had sixty dollars in our pockets, no source of income other than my writing, no trust funds or bank accounts, an aging Irish setter named Tyrone, and a rowboat filled with all our earthly belongings, mostly books. For two weeks we camped out in my friend's backyard while sweatily searching for an affordable house to rent, but I had my garlic press and barbecue grill at hand and was determined to keep my dear Miss F. well fed while she swam up the academic stream through the currents of tort law and statutory interpretation. Then came GQ's immodest proposal. I called them back the next day and said, in the immortal words of the Gumball King, *Let the big dog eat.*

The book now in your hands is a result of that decision, five years ago—which is an extremely long amount of time for a fellow like me to contemplate his domestic navel. In many ways, *Domesticity* is a prose stew, much like the commonplace books popular in the Middle Ages, a much-blackened iron kettle filled with extracts and essences—recipes, prayers, quotations, anecdotes, tributes and tribulations. In a way, it is the diary of our life that I never thought to keep. And as a document of self, it has taught me to value and remember the ordinary in the floodtide of an extraordinary world, where my attention most resides.

Bob Shacochian  
June, 1993  
Florida

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# PART ONE



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## DINING MISS F.

Miss F. and I live in a small city in north Florida, a place where cats and dogs are the favorite food of the local alligators. I'm sorry to report that we are many a league distant from a good delicatessen yet close enough to the sea and year-round farmers' markets to assure ourselves that our existence is not at all deprived. Still, you can't find a first-rate roast beef sandwich within a hundred-mile radius and so it was with great expectation and a sense of gastronomic deliverance that we travelled to Manhattan together last month when our schedules allowed us to be there together for the first time in a couple of years.

The first morning, we had our coffee and poached eggs at the Algonquin with a friend who'd been out of touch with us for a while.

"So what's up with you two these days?" asked she, a hyper-ambitious photographer permanently bivouacked in midtown. This woman lived a scratch-and-hustle life to stay afloat. Miss F. successfully barraged her with law-school war stories, having learned by now that everyone in the world enjoys hearing what innate sleazebags those occupied by the legal profession frequently are, as evidenced early on in their development during the tadpole stage of studenthood. When Miss F. finished with her cruel lawyer/rat joke, it was my turn.

"Well," I admitted with happy innocence, "one of the things I'm doing is writing the 'Dining In' column for *GQ*."

"Restaurants!" she enthused. "Lucky you!"

"No, no, no," I corrected her, "It's not about restaurants, it's about dining in. You know, staying at home."

"Dining *in*?" She looked puzzled, even alarmed, as if since she last saw me I had become a fellow who spoke only in nonsense riddles. Then her face brightened with revelation, and finally her expression was one of incredulity.

"You mean to tell me," she gasped, "that you're writing a column about *take-out*?!" Her confusion was familiar to me, and entirely justifiable seeing as how never once, invited into a New Yorker's apartment, had I opened a refrigerator and observed actual, verifiable food in the box. Always, the freezer would contain a frosty bottle of vodka and a misshapen berg of ice. The lower compartment would invariably house a jar of Dijon mustard in the door, a quart of milk, mineral water, or juice, and perhaps a supply of medication requiring cool temperatures; and occasionally, but not as often as you might think, a white paper sack or tin-foiled lump of something meant to be eaten last week, when it was fresh, in some more exciting part of the metropolis than one's own place of residence.

Why does the sight of a barren refrigerator evoke in me a sense of culture shock? I'm not sure I understand it at all, the typical urbanite's aversion to preparing a meal, eating at home a refined version of what has been thoughtfully foraged from the outside. Sure, Miss F. and I were playing along—we were in the Very Big City for business, to have a fast time and, yes, to eat: to eat extravagantly, intemperately *well*. Still, after 72 gourmanding hours, I'd had it. The idea of dining out night after night—even just several times a week—seems a bit rigorous to me, akin to camping out, an activity that I have determined to be the essence of the New York City life-style, high or low. People drop by their own digs to brush their teeth and pick up mail, and to sleep or commit variations on the

theme. And that's about the extent of their domestic downtime, except on Sunday when they might nod at a ballgame on tv while they scan the *Times*. Any other aspect of home life for anyone not awash in babies is too tedious: it seems irrelevant, unproductive, unprofitable and—here's the clincher—boring. Nobody in the world has a lower boredom threshold than New Yorkers, and it makes the kitchens lonely, forgotten places.

Okay, so one fellow's domesticity is another fellow's shackles. I too am seduced by cosmopolitan restaurants and trendy bistros, menus indecipherable except to a graduate degreeholder in the Romance languages. Ultimately, however, these establishments can become bordellos of endless gastronomic affairs with the appetite prowling and carousing, lascivious and transient. Little more is generated here but an ephemeral commitment that applies only to the glamor of the moment. I am more immune to these moments of escape than anyone else but I know I'll always come home, with a sense of relief, to my own table, convinced that home is the setting of something better, where meaning and satisfaction are anchored firmly into the foundation of our private lives and don't drift off in the tide of yet one more inflated transaction added to the commerce of the day.

What I mean to describe in these pages is the fundamental difference between the process of creating and the process of consuming—a dichotomy much discussed in the current state of the union. The balance, the equilibrium—you could argue that it begins in the kitchen, a most encouraging environment for the evolution of values and temperament, where we learn what is too little and what after all is too much. As best I can tell, there are no Mozarts of cooking, child geniuses born with whisks in their hands, whipping up immortal *creme au beurre* at age five. Instead, we begin with grilled cheese sandwiches and spaghetti every night of the week until, after years of trial and error, we graduate to cassoulet. Very often, it isn't talent that makes a good cook; most often it is the maturation of standards, the determined old-fashioned momentum of love. Let's face it, gentlemen: the kitchen, not the bedroom, is the part of the house where we make ourselves grow up.

• • •

On the return flight to Florida, Miss F., a bit soporific from her annual dose of the Very Big City, yawned and wondered out loud what we were going to do about dinner when we got back home.

"I've been thinking about that," I admitted.

"Poor Mary," sighed Miss F., but with ambivalence, when I told her what I'd planned. Miss F. is grateful that we no longer live in a hunter-gatherer society but she likes her lamb nevertheless. Being a cook, though, you can't kid yourself about where the chops come from, and that's for the best because something vital is preserved in that knowledge. Halfway between the abattoir and the dining room of the Hotel Athenée is where I try to live.

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## BUTTERFLIED LAMB ESPRESSO

This recipe may be grilled or broiled.

*1 leg of lamb, boned and flattened, trimmed of excess fat*

Marinate overnight, refrigerated.

### MARINADE:

*2 cloves garlic, minced*

*½ cup tawny port wine*

*½ cup brewed espresso coffee*

*¼ cup vegetable oil*

*1 tablespoon dry mustard*

*1 tablespoon grated ginger*

*1 teaspoon each dried thyme, salt and pepper*

Skewer the meat at right angles so it doesn't curl inward while broiling. Broil six to eight minutes on each side, brushing once with the marinade. Slice across the grain and serve with kohlrabi in a sauce, béchamel, and endive salad.

SERVES 6.

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# CUISADO DE CARNERO

This is a celebrated style of preparing lamb in Puerto Rico.

*3 pounds lamb shoulder, trimmed of fat and cut into 2-inch cubes*

Heat 3 tablespoons oil in a large pan, sprinkle lamb with 1 teaspoon each salt and pepper, and brown a few pieces at a time. Remove the meat to a side plate. For the rest of the recipe you'll need:

*1 cup dry white wine*

*10 tablespoons fresh orange juice*

*3 tablespoons fresh lime juice*

*2 tablespoons seedless raisins (optional)*

*2 fat, stuffed green olives, chopped*

*2 cloves garlic, minced*

*2 whole cloves*

*3 teaspoons capers, chopped*

*1 teaspoon fresh, hot chilies, chopped fine*

*1 bay leaf*

*12 boiled new potatoes*

Pour off oil from pan and add wine. Bring to a boil, add the other ingredients, stirring constantly, then return the lamb to the pan. Cover and simmer for about 90 minutes until lamb is tender. Center braised lamb on a heated dish, encircle with potatoes, then pour the sauce over the meat.

SERVES 6.

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## LAMB SCHEHERAZADE

This is a Middle Eastern–style leg of lamb. You can roast it, if you wish, for 50–70 minutes at 350 degrees, but it’s much better grilled with indirect heat for about 2 hours.

*1 leg of lamb (4 pounds)*

*4 cloves garlic, slivered*

*4 teaspoons pepper*

Crosshatch lamb with a sharp knife, insert garlic into slits, and rub with pepper. As it grills or roasts, baste with the following sauce:

*1 cup white wine vinegar*

*1 cup soy sauce*

*½ cup olive oil*

*2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice*

*1 small onion, grated*

*1 teaspoon fresh grated ginger*

*½ teaspoon ground nutmeg*

*½ teaspoon ground cloves*

When the meat is done (145 degrees for rare; 155 for medium), slice from bone and serve with cucumber-yogurt sauce:

*2 cups plain yogurt*

*1 cucumber, peeled and shredded*

*½ cup green onions, chopped*

*1 package frozen street peas, thawed*

*½ teaspoon ground cumin*

*½ teaspoon each salt and sugar*

*½ teaspoon chili powder*

Stir ingredients together in a bowl. Cover and refrigerate overnight. Stir before spooning on lamb. Serve with tabouli.



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# BOZBASH

(LAMB STEW WITH SOUR FRUIT)

*1 handful of chick peas (soaked for 24 hours)*

*1 pound stewing lamb, cut into chunks*

*3 cups water*

*2 onions, chopped*

*4 damsons or stoned prunes with a squirt of lemon juice*

*1 tablespoon tomato paste*

*2 potatoes (or 5 chestnuts)*

*1 tablespoon coriander*

*1 tablespoon fresh parsley, chopped*

*½ tablespoon fresh thyme, chopped*

*2 pinches saffron or tumeric*

*6 black peppercorns*

*Salt and pepper to taste*

As Leslie Chamberlin will tell you in her wonderful book, *The Food and Cooking of Russia*, cook the chick peas in unsalted water for 3 hours. Drain and reserve the liquid. Place the lamb in a saucepan with the water, bring to a boil, then simmer covered for an hour. Add the chick peas, onions, damsons and peppercorns and cook over low heat for 30 minutes. Add tomato paste, chopped potatoes or chestnuts, season to taste with salt and pepper, and cook for another 30 minutes, adding the reserved liquid from the chick peas if necessary. After a half hour, add the fresh herbs, saffron, more salt and pepper if needed, simmer for three minutes more, let cool for about 5 minutes and then serve.

SERVES 4.

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# THE SCALLOPING GOURMET

One of the great nostalgias of my life is the seafood market of the eastern seaboard, especially the ones you find on the edge of a cornfield, those questionable looking but godsent roadside concerns located on the western boundary of the tidelands, backdropped by a spine of mountains running from North Carolina and Virginia through Maryland and into Pennsylvania. Reminiscent of the Fifties, the structures possess the same habitual shabbiness and temporary character: as often as not the naive fastidiousness of a ma-and-pa enterprise or the ethnic humbleness and insularity of an Old World cottage.

Inside there are outmoded deli display coolers with noisy refrigeration systems or, better still, long plywood trays painted white, shoveled full of crushed ice. Laid out in the snow like avalanche victims the day's catch has been trucked in from the docks of Philadelphia or Baltimore or Maine Avenue in D.C. or hauled from Norfolk and Hampton Roads. I love any grocery or restaurant that handles a bucket of crushed ice, keeping it out front so you can walk up and feel the tendrils of its vapor, for the presence of ice seems like a real guarantee, a basic old-fashioned and true aesthetic. I stop at the shacks for the simple reward of a whiff of oceanic brine and, when the seasons commence, to smell the Old Bay spice and vinegar of a fifteen-gallon cooker steaming blue crabs, the slough-mud fragrance of the bushelled Chincoteague oysters, the cold bone scent of little neck clams, and the trace of iodine in the eelgrass clinging to the shrimp dragged from the sounds. And the fish, fresh Atlantic fish, their scent the strange olfactory equivalent of being underwater. A little chill, a little blood and salt, a little Darwin. When I'm on the road I stop, even with no money in my pocket, if only for a glimpse of the entrepreneurs who understand about the rest of us lubbers, that no matter who we are we couldn't be living all that well without fresh *fruits de mer* for our tables.

Long before I met Miss F., I lived in northern Virginia and courted a girl in college, two hours south in the mountains. After every weekend visit, on my way north back toward Washington, I would pull over at a clapboard seafood shack on Route 29 to provision myself for the following week. The business was named forthrightly, "Jimmy's Seafood," with another improvised sign beneath the first bearing the important message "Crabs, Live or Steamed." Jimmy was a round black man in denim overalls and a clean white shirt who had a weakness for croaker and shad roe and could not be wooed from these pleasures. I held in esteem the hygiene of his ice, the sawdust sprinkled on the bare wood floor, the surgical evenness of his gut lines on the pale hollow bellies of gray trout and blues, the fact that you never saw a bivalve in his shop with a yawn to its shell. As a rule, he corned or smoked his own surplus after three days, and there were translucent dice of mullet or mackerel to sample, covered with a sheet of wax paper, on a plate near the cashbox. The shack was torn down about ten years ago and replaced by a gas and convenience store. The good news, from Miss F.'s point of view, is that I miss Jimmy and his stock much more than I miss the old girlfriend.

Now, approaching the middle of my so-called adulthood, after too many years spent sloggish through the mud of the ocean-lonely prairies of the Midwest, seeking some form of higher education, I hold these truths to be self-evident: 1. Life is too short not to eat seafood as often as possible; 2. Life is too short not to live it by the glorious sea; 3. Life is too short not to go offshore at least once a year; and 4. Life is too short, period; yet living on the coast and grilling yellowfin tuna you caught yourself



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