

EATING WORDS

FOREWORD BY
RUTH REICHL

**A NORTON
ANTHOLOGY OF
FOOD
WRITING**

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Eating Words

A Norton Anthology of
Food Writing



Edited by
Sandra M. Gilbert &
Roger J. Porter



With a Foreword by Ruth Reichl



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*To the memory of Robert Reynolds,
food guru, inspired teacher, and gastro-wit.*

*And to Vitaly and Kimberly Paley,
whose great restaurant, Paley's Place,
as been the site of enduring memories.*

—RJP

*In memory of my beloved grandfather,
Amedeé Mortola, a consummate artist of the kitchen,
and my husband, Elliot L. Gilbert,
cook of a lifetime.*

—SMG

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FOREWORD

Ruth Reichl

ASK MOST modern American food writers why they've chosen food as their subject, and you're likely to get a quote from Mary Frances Fisher. It comes from the introduction to *The Art of Eating*.

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 it is all one.

I used to quote that myself when I was trying to explain why I write about food. Now I wonder what possessed me to do that. They are lovely sentiments. They are also an apology.

Over the many years that I knew Mary Frances Fisher she often told me, "I am not a food writer." Indeed, if you read between the lines you realize that she was a bit embarrassed by her passion. And so in this famous passage she insists that food is not her true subject. "I am really," she promises, "writing about bigger things. . . ."

To understand why Fisher considered food too small a subject, why she worried about being "unfaithful to her craft," it helps to read her words in the context of her time. Food and cooking do not exist in a vacuum, and the way people write about what they eat always reflects the society in which they live. For that reason the changing language of food can be extremely revealing.

Consider, for example, the first piece of food writing that ever moved me.

"When you wake up in the morning, Pooh," said Piglet at last, "what's the first thing you say to yourself?"

"What's for breakfast?" said Pooh. "What do you say, Piglet?"

"I say, I wonder what's going to happen exciting today," said Piglet.

Pooh nodded thoughtfully. "It's the same thing," he said.

I must have been six when I first read those words, and they hit me with such force that I stopped to read them a second time. They were so different from the fairy tales to which I was accustomed. The others were also about food, but they contained witches who wanted to cook you, wolves who wanted to eat you, or apples that turned out to be poisoned. In Pooh's tale, food was your friend, and as someone who has always liked to eat I appreciated that. It wasn't until I grew up that I began to wonder why this particular story was so different from the ones that came before.

Alan Alexander Milne wrote *Winnie-the-Pooh* in 1926, and if you look at the England of the time, his attitude toward food becomes completely clear. The First World War had ended, the middle class was rising, and the entire country was beginning to liberate itself from the confines of a rigid Victorian culture that made the enjoyment of food almost impossible for almost everyone.

For poor people there had never been enough. The wealthy, on the other hand, suffered from the opposite extreme: there was too much of everything. Guests at a formal Victorian dinner were forced to wrangle with thirty-one different pieces of flatware, each with a specific purpose. Even those sitting down to lesser meals found themselves confronted by two large knives, a tablespoon for soup, three

large forks, and a small silver fish knife and fork. Using the wrong utensil would instantly label one an uneducated lout who did not belong in polite company.

You were meant to know when to use each fork and knife, and in what order to drink the liquids that filled the many glasses surrounding your plate. You needed to know that the large plate in front of you was for meat and the crescent one for salad, and that they were to be used at the same time. Should you end up with an unused implement at meal's end, your social life was over.

This wasn't dinner: it was an exam. And that was precisely its purpose: in the Victorian era food was a means of keeping the classes separate and preventing social mobility. It's easy to understand how a roly-poly little bear who considered eating a happy adventure turned into a national hero. *Winnie-the-Pooh* may be a children's book, but those few little lines about breakfast offer us a window into a rapidly changing society.

The truth is that you can enter history at almost any point and find out a great deal merely by listening to writers describing their meals.

Here's the Greek poet Philoxenus, around the year 400 BC—as quoted in *The Classical Cookbook*—telling his lover about a great feast he has just attended.

A casserole full of a noble eel with a look of the conger about him,
Honey glazed shrimps besides, my love,
Squid sprinkled with sea-salt,
Baby birds in flaky pastry,
And a baked tuna, Gods! What a huge one, fresh from the fire
and the pan and the carving knife,
Enough steaks from its tender belly to delight us both as long as
we might care to stay and munch.

Clearly these were happy eaters, people who enjoyed simple food and consumed it without a lot of fuss. Arcestratus, who lived around the same time, was kind enough to leave us his recipe for preparing hare: “. . . bring the roast meat in and serve it to everyone while they are drinking: hot, simply sprinkled with salt, taking it from the spit while still a little rare.”

Move forward a few centuries and you instantly see how much things had changed. Marcus Gavius Apicius was the great epicure of the first century. Of a mousse containing minced fish, eggs, oil, pepper, and rue, pressed into a pan and topped with a sea anemone before being steamed, he noted happily: “At table no one will know what he is eating.”

And that, of course, was the point: by the time of Apicius, food was no longer simply roasted and sprinkled with salt. The Greek world had grown larger, and along with it, Greek appetites. When Alexander the Great went off on his journeys of conquest, he took botanists with him. It had the same explosive effect as the journey of Christopher Columbus: it changed the way the world ate. Just as Columbus introduced tomatoes to Italy, potatoes to Ireland, and chiles to India, Alexander returned bearing the hitherto unknown citrus, peaches, pistachios, and peacocks. All you need to do is read descriptions of the food to understand how profoundly Greek life had changed.

A similar cultural shift took place in Islamic society. Writers of the time tell us that Mohammad would eat just about anything (except lizards, which he loathed), and that his followers did not presume to eat more elaborately than the Prophet. During his lifetime, food in the world of Islam was extremely simple. But as the center of the Muslim universe moved east a deeply epicurean tradition developed around “poems of the table.”

At first these poems were simply meant to be recited during banquets, but they soon evolved into something much more complicated. The invitations to one famous banquet given by the caliph instructed each guest to memorize a famous poem praising a particular dish. As the meal progressed each guest stood to recite his poem. As he did so, the cooks rushed off to prepare the dish in the exact

manner described in the poem.

The chefs were, apparently, unfazed; at the banquet describe by Al-Masudi in *Meadows of Gold*, the only poem that stumped the chefs was one in praise of asparagus. It was out of season; they had to send runners off to Damascus, and by the time the runners returned the banquet was over.

Reading the description of these feasts tells you more than any history book about the transformation of Islamic society. Clearly it no longer resembled the one in which Mohammad sat in the desert eating the simple dishes that were put before him.

The sheer unself-consciousness of these historical food writings is extremely appealing. The portraits they paint are almost accidental, but that does not reduce their power. This anthology offers a short but telling romp through the edible history of the world, beginning with the Bible and coming right up to the present day.

But fiction writers use food in an entirely different manner. They know there is no more effective means of telegraphing class, caste, and character. Put your heroine to bed with a couple of cream puffs, and people instantly make assumptions. Have her pop a pizza into the microwave for her kid's dinner, and we understand exactly who she is. To fiction writers and to poets as well, food is a marvelous tool, a quick verbal shortcut that can say a great deal in a very few words. Melville and Proust and Chekhov, and poets such as William Carlos Williams and Seamus Heaney—their selections in this book demonstrate how they have used food to devastating effect.

But writing about food does more than merely reflect culture and act in the service of art; it also has the ability to transform society. Nobody has ever recognized this so clearly as the French, who captured the haute cuisine high ground early on by writing about their food, publicizing their food, and using it as a kind of marketing strategy. They gave their food a national identity and sent it off to conquer the world.

The earliest French cookbook was the *Cuisinier français*. Published in 1651, the book proudly staked its claim to national identity. Plenty of previous cookbooks had been published in Europe—from the English Robert May's *The Accomplisht Cook* of 1588 to the Italian *Il Trinciante (The Carver)* of 1581—but none of them was stamped with a nationality.

The *Cuisinier français* was to have an enormous influence on cooking throughout the Western world. The English translation, which was published two years after the French version, remained in print for almost two hundred years. By then the French had claimed the language of cooking so effectively that we're still under its influence. Flip through any American cookbook (or walk through any supermarket), and you'll be stunned by how many of our foods have French names.

But we Americans have been slow to adopt the language of food. Even our best-loved national dishes—hamburgers, French fries, and pizza come immediately to mind—pay tribute to other tongues. Where are the American words?

Which brings us back to Ms. Fisher and her reluctant embrace of food writing. In her time, food was not considered a respectable subject. It was relegated to what were then called "the women's pages" of the newspaper. As recently as the seventies, Jacques Pépin, who was studying for a PhD in philosophy and literature at Columbia, proposed writing a doctoral thesis on the history of French food presented in the context of French literature. His adviser turned him down flat. "Cuisine," he pontificated, "is not a serious art form. It's far too trivial for academic study."

But as this book proves, things were about to change. Much of the wonderful writing you will find here was written in the past thirty years by people who took it extremely seriously. What does this say about our own society?

At first it might seem that this reflects a more benign attitude toward food. Look again; much of this writing, whether it is on culture, politics, or identity, reflects a deep malaise about what is taking place at our table. And with good reason: there has never been a time in human history when a

population was so profoundly disconnected from its food supply. America was once an agrarian society, but the modern industrialization of food and farming has made us increasingly dependent upon others for our sustenance. We no longer grow our own food, and every year we rely more heavily on others to prepare what we consume. We now eat out so often that many people consider cooking an endangered art.

And yet the less we cook, the more we read about food; it as if we are desperate to reconnect in the only way we can. As a result, we are living in the golden age of food writing. I'm fairly certain that if Mary Frances Fisher were alive today, she would no longer feel the need to apologize. She might even be willing to call herself a food writer. And I'm sure that she would understand that in the modern world, food writing has become as necessary as food itself.

A TOAST TO TASTE

AN ABC OF FOOD WRITING

“FOOD AND cooking,” proclaimed the theologian and cookbook writer Robert Farrar Capon in 1989 “are not low subjects.” Rather, he added, they are “among the richest subjects in the world. Every day of our lives, they preoccupy, delight, and refresh us.” Indeed, he concluded, “Food, like all the other triumphs of human nature, is evidence of civilization.” Composing a preface to the second edition of his best-selling *The Supper of the Lamb*, Capon was riding the crest of a wave of food writing that gathered strength throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, and has turned into a tsunami of food memoirs (“foodoirs”), chef’s bios, cookbooks, gourmet magazines, and culinary essays.

Capon’s modern and modernist precursors, as we’ll see in this anthology, include such notable figures as Alice B. Toklas and Ernest Hemingway, M.F.K. Fisher and A. J. Liebling. His contemporaries and descendants are equally distinguished: Calvin Trillin, Anthony Bourdain, Adam Gopnik, Michael Pollan—and on and on, as our table of contents reveals. And we might also number among them the writers of food films (*Babette’s Feast*, *Like Water for Chocolate*, *Ratatouille*, *Big Night*, *Julie & Julia*) and food television shows (*Iron Chef*, *Molto Mario*, *Bizarre Foods*, *No Reservations*) along with the matriarch of such gastronomic “infotainment,” the great Julia Child herself. But we might also include the authors of a little brightly colored cardboard children’s book (aimed presumably at a preschool readership) titled *My Foodie ABC: A Little Gourmet’s Guide*.

“Foodie: a person with an avid interest in the latest food fads.” “Gourmet: A gourmet is a person who has sharp and refined tastes and is an expert in the art of food.” Along with definitions of “chanterelles,” “dragon fruit,” “farmer’s market,” “jicama,” and “locavore,” these are just a few of the bits of wisdom that *My Foodie ABC* seeks to impart to hungry little cosmopolites. If they’re watching *Iron Chef* or *Top Chef* as mom reads to them, so much the better. But with-it though they are, their fascination with food dates back not just to the chorus so famously sung in the sixties musical *Oliver!*—“Food, glorious food!”—but to much writing intended for what one critic has lately called “voracious children”: *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Raggedy Ann and Andy in Cookie Land*, *Little House on the Prairie*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and, needless to say, such fairy tales as “Hansel and Gretel” and “Snow White.” Children love rivers of ice cream, gingerbread houses, little cakes that say “Eat me,” and even sometimes (to their sorrow) poisoned apples.

Can it be that, when we brood on food, glorious food, we are all children? We long for its deliciousness, fear it, taste it in our dreams, dream of its pleasures, and always, always write about it. For food evokes words; we enjoy speaking about food and taste almost as much as we enjoy eating itself. Indeed we can hardly eat without talking about it. *Eating words* may have been, after all, our earliest words. Consider the forbidden fruit in Eden! Consider also the secrets of fire stolen by the culture hero Prometheus, who made cooking possible! This collection of food writings focuses on contemporary “eating words” but finds its origins in biblical and classical times. We represent a passage from the Old Testament to dramatize the culinary choices and taboos that have always marked eating practices in cultures around the world. Just as ancient Jews were urged to forgo meat with milk and to renounce pork, Hindus were taught to abrogate beef, Muslims to renounce alcohol and pork,

and Zoroastrians to subsist on raw vegetables. But similarly, classical Greeks were taught by Socrates and his disciple Plato to reject the *material* pleasures of eating. In the *Gorgias*, Plato reports Socrates declaring that “the art of cookery” is as low as “the art of rhetoric.” It is to this view that Father Capon, the Episcopalian priest cum cookbook writer, responds when he insists that food and cooking are not “low subjects.”

Historically, however, writers about food have been ambivalent. Cooks, usually women, have until the twentieth century been sequestered in kitchens, sometimes structures entirely separated from aristocratic households, sometimes basement bastions below bourgeois homes, and sometimes humble hearths in peasant cottages. Food itself, while a source of delight, also reminds us—as Plato noted—of our materiality. As human beings we both *have* and *are* bodies, and the food that enters so pleasantly between our lips exits, more degradingly, as excrement. Along with the great French gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, we may extoll its spiritual pleasures—its insubstantial “taste.” But, like Plato, we must concede its appeal to our animal nature. And although food writing has from the start been generically diverse, as we shall see throughout this anthology, such ambivalence toward eating and cooking has given the vast literature of gastronomy a special flavor. From the start—in Western culture going back to biblical and classical writers, and in, say, Chinese society to comparable early texts—this writing has been sometimes separately and sometimes simultaneously instructive, mythical, celebratory, and political. From the twentieth century onward, though, such writing has become perhaps even more mainstream than these specific categories suggest, for food has in the last century or so become central to the literary genres that we hold in the highest esteem—the novel, the poem, and (especially as it appears on film and video) the drama.

A LITTLE HISTORY OF FOOD WRITING

WRITTEN RECIPES for dishes as quotidian as bread or as exotic as the Byzantine *monokythron* (meaning “one-pot meal”) began to appear centuries ago. The biblical book of Ezekiel offers relatively vague instructions for a sort of sprouted grain bread that was to sustain the Israelites during a siege of Jerusalem: “Take thou . . . wheat, and barley, and beans, and lentiles, and millet, and fitches, and put them in one vessel, and make thee bread thereof.” Hopefully, this would sustain countless victims of the Roman siege. The far more specific recipe for the *monokythron* is also more elaborate, calling for (among other ingredients) “four hearts of cabbage . . . a salted neck of swordfish; a middle cut of carp . . . a slice of salt sturgeon; fourteen eggs and some Cretan cheese” along with “a bit of Vlach cheese and a pint of olive oil, a handful of pepper, twelve little heads of garlic and fifteen chub mackerels.” Presumably this would feed many hungry courtiers.

Even while collections of recipes explained culinary practices to literate cooks (of whom there can’t have been that many until quite recently), physicians and moralists enjoined diners to watch what they ate. Beyond the food taboos outlined in religious texts from many cultures and the generalized aversion to the materiality of digestion itself expressed by Plato, clerics around the world often preached the virtues of abstinence while denouncing the fleshly pleasures of the table. Some writers, like Petronius in his *Satyricon*, satirized the vulgar excesses of the nouveau riche. Others, like Horace and Plutarch (and countless Hindu and Buddhist thinkers), decried the slaughter of animals for food, exclaiming, as Plutarch does in our selection here, that “I rather wonder both by what accident and in what state of soul or mind the first man who did so, touched his mouth to gore and brought his lips to the flesh of a dead creature.”

Even among ordinary, non-philosophical folk, fasting has as long a history as feasting: Jews

abstain from eating on Yom Kippur; Catholics reject luxurious foods during Lent and for centuries renounced meat on Fridays; Muslims fast daily, from sunrise to sunset, throughout the month-long observance of Ramadan; Hindus similarly fast during a number of religious festivals. And of course Puritan thinkers regularly and vehemently denounced gluttony (which they often associated with Catholicism); warned one writer, “Be very careful and circumspect in taking thy food, bridle thine appetite.” That the delights of the table were temptations to be avoided by all good Christians was a view that persisted in Anglo-American society well into the early twentieth century. In such classic novels as *Oliver Twist* and *Jane Eyre* the young protagonists are scolded for their hunger, and even Miss Temple, Jane’s kindly teacher, is rebuked by the hypocritical clergyman Brocklehurst when she offers her charges a lunch of bread and cheese after their breakfast has been burned. “Oh, madam,” intones the (personally well-fed) preacher, “when you put bread and cheese, instead of burnt porridge into these children’s mouths, you may indeed feed their vile bodies, but you little think how you starve their immortal souls!”

“Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?” “Yes, by Saint Anne, and ginger shall be hot i’ the mouth too!” With these famous words, Shakespeare’s Sir Toby Belch and his sidekick Sir Andrew Aguecheek rebuke the puritanical Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*. While Malvolio, a bourgeois steward in a grand household, represents the culture of fasting, these two raffish aristocrats yearn to celebrate feasting. And such celebratory feasting has its roots not just in the desire for culinary pleasure but also in myth, magic, and metaphor. For the origin of food has often been attributed to the divine interventions of the gods. Such fire-bringers as Prometheus, in Greek culture, have long been extolled as culture heroes who enabled humble peasants to transform the raw to the cooked. At the same time, foods themselves have often been incarnated as gods. The Aztecs worshipped corn, a sacrificial lordly being who gave himself up to the kettle to be cooked yet was eternal. Christians, for their part, worshipped a mystical rabbi who claimed that his flesh would be their bread, his blood their wine. And countless fairy tales, along with theological works, extol the virtues, charms, and claims of enchanted or enchanting victuals.

Some of the foods they depict may have been what have been called “entheogens,” substances containing consciousness-transforming chemicals—for instance, peyote and magic mushrooms. Some foods are imaginatively portrayed as seductive but dangerous, like the gingerbread house in “Hansel and Gretel,” to go back to children’s literature. Others, as in our selection from Rabelais, inspire extravagant cases of fabulous gluttony. And others are love potions, poisons, strengthening medicinal drinks, as well as lotus roots that lead to lassitude and wines that foster joy. From Homer to the Brothers Grimm, from Virgil to Hans Christian Andersen, from the Child Ballads to the verses of the Romantic poet John Keats and, more recently, the tales for children of Johnny Gruelle and Roald Dahl, writers have focused on foods that are, as Coleridge put it in “Kubla Khan,” “honey-dew” and “the milk of Paradise.”

Starting in the eighteenth century and on into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, authors working in the new, more realistic genre of the novel began to turn their attention from culinary magic and mystery to everyday reality. The food for which *Oliver Twist* and *Jane Eyre* yearn is quotidian food, daily bread: Oliver wants more porridge; Jane savors seed cake. And such ordinary food plays a central, celebratory role in famous works that precede or descend from the books in which Oliver and Jane star. Published in the mid-eighteenth century, Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, for instance, features a famous literary seduction in which two lovers supping at a tavern slurp and suck and lick their way through a meal into bed. Published in the early twentieth century, Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* dramatizes a festive dinner party whose centerpiece is a savory casserole of *boeuf en daube*—a classic French beef stew. The narrator stresses not so much the succulent dish itself as the way it brings the diners together in a culinary communion of delight, momentarily obliterating all

conflicts or strains among them.

Modern food writers, arguably, have been influenced by such seemingly ordinary fare. When William Carlos Williams wrote a notoriously plaintive verse note to his sleeping wife, explaining that he had gobbled up the plums she was keeping in the icebox for breakfast because they were “so sweet and so cold,” he initiated an entire new mode of food writing, one that would continue to celebrate in lyrical verse and prose the very essence of daily eating. And when the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg explored “A Supermarket in California,” through which he was guided by his great spiritual precursor Walt Whitman (as Dante had been guided by Virgil), the magic of the daily had been confirmed. Declared Ginsberg, in one of his finest poems,

I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys.

I heard you asking questions of each: Who killed the pork chops? What price bananas? Are you my Angel?

Here, perhaps, began the sorts of eating words that are so central today: words that consider economy (“What price bananas?”) along with mystery (“Are you my Angel?”), politics as well as pleasure.

READING EATING WORDS TODAY

WHAT ARE THE pleasures that so many of us currently gain from reading about food? And what are the pleasures inherent in writing about food? Both activities, to begin with, speak to the significance that eating has for us—our gastronomic appetite, our cultural memories of the table, the symbolic value we assign to the most primal of our physical needs. And since the title of our anthology—*Eating Words*—implies a powerful nexus of food and language, what is that relation? Food of course has always brought people together, starting with the way fire served to cook, protect, and encourage people to share common ground; and in Woolf’s novel, for instance, a marvel of cooking both produces and celebrates a life-enhancing moment. As in *To the Lighthouse*, much food writing speaks precisely to the ways participating in a meal creates a sense of ensemble, provoking spirited talk—nowadays often talk about food itself, the very meal being consumed, and other memorable meals. When we read about such occasions we frequently have an almost Pavlovian response: “Now that *boeuf* reminds me of a little bistro where, in Burgundy, I once had . . .” And if others chime in, each topping the others’ gastronomic travelogues, we join a circle of knowledge and shared tastes.

Reading about food in and of itself, outside of narrative structures, can also be an undeniably sensuous experience. It’s not merely that certain foods, such as oysters, chocolate, snake blood, bull’s testicles, and hot peppers are regarded as aphrodisiacs; any food writing can be seductive. No wonder critics have come to speak of “food porn.” Gorgeous food photography may start the juices flowing, but so do accounts of oysters by M.F.K. Fisher and Seamus Heaney, along with (among other texts we include) Walter Benjamin’s meditation on figs, Austin Clarke’s celebration of souse, and Ray Gonzalez’s ode to *menudo*. Given such textual pleasures, we might wonder whether food reading is a mode of sublimation, a substitute for the real thing, or conversely a doubling of pleasure, spice and condiment to the enticing ingredient or the steaming platter.

To be sure, for some people the consumption of food can be troubling. For sufferers from a range of physical illnesses (diabetes, celiac disease, other allergies, gout) eating can actually be dangerous. To victims of such psychological disorders as anorexia and bulimia, the pleasures of the table may appear toxic. Even those possessed of healthy appetites may fear obesity or cringe at the thought of

animal slaughter. And from Upton Sinclair to Eric Schlosser and Michael Pollan, American polemicists have savagely critiqued the food industry for its brutal butchery practices and unsanitary locations. Our section on the politics of food includes angry texts by these writers along with meditations by such thoughtful locavores as Carlo Petrini, Wendell Berry, and Barbara Kingsolver, and figures who consider the possibilities of sensitive agriculture and mindful eating. Perhaps we read the utopian imaginings of some of these thinkers in order to assuage the anxieties aroused by so many dystopian diatribes.

In the face of such culinary cultural complexity, it can be a relief to counter the gastronomic superego with sentences that celebrate the joys of feasting and the pleasures of the palate. Feeling guilty about eating? Read A. J. Liebling's mouthwatering menus and get a reprieve. Think *you're* being indulgent? Turn to Julia Child's relish in *sole meunière* and experience digestive delight. Nothing sparks an appetite like a saucy restaurant review by Jonathan Gold, or will pique your gastronomic curiosity like the narrative of French president Mitterand's last meal of Armagnac-soaked ortolans. Want a vicariously dangerous but risk-free experience? Join Diane Ackerman as she flirts with death during a meal of fugu, the sometimes deadly Japanese fish.

Another reason we can't get our fill of food writing is that its stories are at once enticingly familiar and oddly unexpected, tales sometimes nostalgically evoking childhood and sometimes vibrant with surprise. Food recollections like those recounted by writers from Proust to Fisher, Clarke, and Lorde frequently send us in search of our own memories. As we read we may often anticipate a moment when the writer has his or her gastro-epiphany, reminiscence shading into a revelation that changes everything. Consuming food is our earliest source of satisfaction, and we satisfy desire with repetition. Yet, like Chang-rae Lee, who nervously scoops out the weird flesh of a sea urchin, we must learn to expand our taste and open ourselves to experimentation. We read about food to satisfy both impulses: reiteration and renewal.

These days there is much heated discussion of matters culinary; add food to the classic "big three" subjects—religion, politics, and sex. No one any longer cautions children, as some Victorian parents did, against talking about food in polite company. It's not only a permissible topic, it's encouraged, expected, and assumed. Everywhere you look, someone is advising you to try your hand in the kitchen (mothers no longer discourage sons from the stove), introducing you to celebrity chefs, even showing videos of fearless gastronomes scarfing deep-fried scorpions and loin of kangaroo. Food blogging is a growth industry, the Food Network is a mega-channel, food tourism is on the march, and numerous universities now have Food Studies programs (Slow Food in Italy has its own gastro-university). While one might question the reliability of Yelp and Zagat as they turn amateur diners into would-be pros, the popularity of these venues certainly implies that Every Diner has become an expert: nothing more than the possession of presumptuous taste buds seems to justify authority.

Why, more than ever, do so many writers turn to food? Some pundits believe that today we are obsessed with visual and literary representations of food because literal cooking is becoming a lost art. As Michael Pollan has argued, the rise of the Food Network "has, paradoxically, coincided with the rise of fast food, home-meal replacements and the decline and fall of everyday home cooking." Do we in fact prefer the simulacrum of cooking to the real thing? The proliferation of gourmet food stores and trendy kitchenware shops would seem to suggest that despite (or perhaps because of) all the culinary TV shows and restaurants out there, people are still practicing knife skills and demonstrating skillet proficiency. What is certainly true, however, is that in or out of the kitchen, at the table and even in the bedroom, people are reading about, looking at, and thinking about food. Some people even get competitive at the stove, so that for them the kitchen may have replaced the boudoir as a site of performance anxiety. Certainly any serious bookstore is laden with gastronomic tomes. At Powell's in Portland there are easily several hundred food memoirs, and over three dozen shelves bulging with

culinary history. And if we had the space, we could easily triple or quadruple the size of this anthology. Consider, therefore, that the pages ahead of you constitute a delectable set of *hors d'œuvres variés* intended to stimulate your appetite for the increasingly rich menu of food writing.

Food Writing Through History

From Biblical Taboos to Sinclair's Stockyards

INTRODUCTION

PEOPLE HAVE been thinking and writing about eating as long as people have been eating and talking—in other words, almost forever. Worldwide, and deep into history, social scientists and evolutionary biologists have found that sustained food sharing distinguishes humans from animals. Yes, from ants and bees to wolves and bats, many creatures divide the spoils of foraging or hunting; but the multiple and complex patterns of food sharing among humans are unique. We share within and among families between generations, between tribes and cultures, and, in various ways, across time. And as we share we think and talk, set down rules, preach appropriate practices, invite guests to dine, celebrate delicacies, decry poison and pollution, remember the pleasures of special tables, brood on culinary wrongdoing, tell—over and over again—tales of food: food we loved and hated, food that made us well and food that made us sick, food that gave grace and food that was sour, bitter, even poisonous.

Writing about food, in fact, must have begun when people started to write and wanted to advise each other about deliciousness or danger, or simply record their experiences. Our selection here from the Old Testament of the western Bible, also known by Jews as the Torah, is one of the sources of the dietary laws observed by many Orthodox Jews, forbidding the consumption of pork and shellfish while stipulating the separation of meat products from dairy foods (“Thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother’s milk”). Comparable food rules and taboos are, of course, observed in many other cultures: devout Hindus don’t eat beef, for instance, considering the cow a sacred animal, and many are both teetotalers and vegetarians; Muslims don’t eat pork nor do they drink alcohol; many Buddhists eschew spices; Catholics traditionally renounce meat on Fridays and during Lent.

The very existence of such restrictions should remind us that eating itself is a fraught and sometimes perilous act. As such, it invites the kinds of philosophical meditation we see in our excerpt from Plutarch’s classical vegetarian tract, attacking the savage bloodshed associated with butchery and “flesh-eating.” And thoughts of eating invite, too, the moralizings we encounter in our selections from such writers as Joel Barlow, Louisa May Alcott, and Frederick Douglass. Barlow praises the homely “hasty pudding”—a sort of cornmeal mush—that he associates with American purity, which he sees as the opposite of European corruption. Alcott, for her part, attacks the parsimonious gastronomy practiced by the transcendentalist philosophers (the worst culprit her father, Bronson!) who founded Fruitlands, an early New England vegan commune. And in a piece that has connections with both Barlow’s writing and Alcott’s, Douglass, remembering his origins as a slave in the American South, describes the “ash cake,” a cornbread akin to, but not as comforting as, “hasty pudding,” that formed the diet of enchained African-Americans, while inveighing against the laden, decadent tables of the plantation owners.

Because eating is also a supremely pleasurable act, however, it also evokes celebratory invitations and reflections. Here we include appetizing gastronomic verses that the Roman poet Horace and his Renaissance acolyte Ben Jonson addressed to prospective dinner guests, outlining the delights of the

table, whether “smallish portions of vegetarian food” (Horace) or “partrich, pheasant, wood-cock” and other “fowle” (Jonson). And in a similar vein, though retrospectively, Dumas extolls the French onion. Thoreau the watermelon, Melville the whale, and Proust—perhaps the most famous of all food memoirists—the modest madeleine, dipped in tea, out of which his entire *Remembrance of Things Past* blossomed.

A more nuanced but equally celebratory view of food is offered in Chekhov’s “Oysters,” whose protagonist, starving in tsarist Russia, is introduced to the delights of raw shellfish—and has his life saved by that gourmet food. At the same time, because the pleasures of eating can be so compelling, a number of writers satirize the excess that culinary luxury can inspire. Petronius’s “Trimalchio’s Feast,” from his classic *Satyricon*, is perhaps the most notable representation of almost obscenely out-of-control eating in Western literary history; the Roman author dramatizes a dinner party thrown by a nouveau riche citizen that features, among other delectables, a whole roast “wild boar of immense size, wearing a liberty cap upon its head,” along with attendant dishes. But the French Renaissance writer Rabelais’s account of Pantagruel (the son of Gargantua) and his adventures among the “Gastrolaters”—grotesque fabulous foodies—comes in a close second.

How and why did cooking gain such resonance for us, and what is the nature of culinary “taste” anyway? Byron’s *Don Juan* features a cannibal episode that turns on the Romantic poet’s sardonic note that “man is a carnivorous production, / And must have meals, at least one meal a day,” while Charles Lamb’s fanciful “Dissertation upon Roast Pig” comically traces the transformative nature of cooking to an episode in a fancifully imagined ancient China, where a swineherd’s son burned down a house in which a litter of piglets had been sequestered. But Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, the French father of transcendental gastronomy whose arguments are here represented in a translation by the great American food writer M.F.K. Fisher, seriously meditates on the nature and meaning of *taste*, the physiological phenomenon experienced in tongue and gullet that lets us enjoy and, says Brillat-Savarin, inspires us to think about our times at the table. Like the other selections included in this opening section of *Eating Words*, his writing introduces us to what will be major themes throughout this volume: pleasure and pain, delight and disgust, memory and morality. That the last of these, morality, is crucial to our understanding of the culture of eating and cooking is, finally, emphasized in our excerpt from Upton Sinclair’s superb turn-of-the-century novel/polemic *The Jungle*, which powerfully represents the butchery associated with the “flesh-eating” so loathed by Plutarch in ancient Rome. If Plutarch is the literary ancestor of Sinclair, Sinclair is the spiritual father of such contemporary writers as Michael Pollan and Barbara Kingsolver, whom we’ll encounter later in this book.



The Old Testament (c. 538–332 BCE)

PROBABLY COMPLETED, ALONG with the rest of the Pentateuch or Hebrew Torah, between 538 and 332 BCE, the book of *Leviticus* sets down stipulations by which the ancient Israelite priests (the Levites) were to organize both daily life and sacred rituals. In Leviticus 11, which we reprint here, many of the dietary rules of Orthodox Judaism are formulated. Others appear in Deuteronomy 14. All together, these principles govern the practices that have come to be called *kosher* or *kashrut*, meaning “fit” for consumption. For instance, *you may not eat milk with meat; you may not eat pork or shellfish; you may not eat animals from whom the blood hasn’t been drained.* (Says Deuteronomy, you must not “seethe a kid in his mother’s milk”; says Leviticus, “Whatsoever parteth the hoof, and is clovenfooted, and

cheweth the cud, among the beasts, that shall ye eat.”) Similar food taboos and precepts can be found in many other cultures. Devout Muslims eat only what is *halal*. Hindus, considering the cow sacred, do not eat beef, and many are strict vegetarians.

Leviticus 11

1. And the Lord spake unto Moses and to Aaron, saying unto them,
2. Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, These are the beasts which ye shall eat among all the beasts that are on the earth.
3. Whatsoever parteth the hoof, and is clovenfooted, and cheweth the cud, among the beasts, that shall ye eat.
4. Nevertheless these shall ye not eat of them that chew the cud, or of them that divide the hoof: as the camel, because he cheweth the cud, but divideth not the hoof; he is unclean unto you.
5. And the coney, because he cheweth the cud, but divideth not the hoof; he is unclean unto you.
6. And the hare, because he cheweth the cud, but divideth not the hoof; he is unclean unto you.
7. And the swine, though he divide the hoof, and be clovenfooted, yet he cheweth not the cud; he is unclean to you.
8. Of their flesh shall ye not eat, and their carcase shall ye not touch; they are unclean to you.
9. These shall ye eat of all that are in the waters: whatsoever hath fins and scales in the waters, in the seas, and in the rivers, them shall ye eat.
10. And all that have not fins and scales in the seas, and in the rivers, of all that move in the waters, and of any living thing which is in the waters, they shall be an abomination unto you:
11. They shall be even an abomination unto you; ye shall not eat of their flesh, but ye shall have their carcasses in abomination.
12. Whatsoever hath no fins nor scales in the waters, that shall be an abomination unto you.
13. And these are they which ye shall have in abomination among the fowls; they shall not be eaten, they are an abomination: the eagle, and the ossifrage, and the ospray,
14. And the vulture, and the kite after his kind;
15. Every raven after his kind;
16. And the owl, and the night hawk, and the cuckow, and the hawk after his kind,
17. And the little owl, and the cormorant, and the great owl,
18. And the swan, and the pelican, and the gier eagle,
19. And the stork, the heron after her kind, and the lapwing, and the bat.
20. All fowls that creep, going upon all four, shall be an abomination unto you.
21. Yet these may ye eat of every flying creeping thing that goeth upon all four, which have legs above their feet, to leap withal upon the earth;
22. Even these of them ye may eat; the locust after his kind, and the bald locust after his kind, and the beetle after his kind, and the grasshopper after his kind.
23. But all other flying creeping things, which have four feet, shall be an abomination unto you.
24. And for these ye shall be unclean: whosoever toucheth the carcase of them shall be unclean until the even.
25. And whosoever beareth ought of the carcase of them shall wash his clothes, and be unclean until the even.
26. The carcasses of every beast which divideth the hoof, and is not clovenfooted, nor cheweth the cud, are unclean unto you: every one that toucheth them shall be unclean.
27. And whatsoever goeth upon his paws, among all manner of beasts that go on all four, those are unclean unto you: whoso toucheth their carcase shall be unclean until the even.

28. And he that beareth the carcase of them shall wash his clothes, and be unclean until the even: ~~they are unclean unto you.~~
29. These also shall be unclean unto you among the creeping things that creep upon the earth; the weasel, and the mouse, and the tortoise after his kind,
30. And the ferret, and the chameleon, and the lizard, and the snail, and the mole.
31. These are unclean to you among all that creep: whosoever doth touch them, when they be dead, shall be unclean until the even.
32. And upon whatsoever any of them, when they are dead, doth fall, it shall be unclean; whether it be any vessel of wood, or raiment, or skin, or sack, whatsoever vessel it be, wherein any work is done, it must be put into water, and it shall be unclean until the even; so it shall be cleansed.
33. And every earthen vessel, whereinto any of them falleth, whatsoever is in it shall be unclean; and ye shall break it.
34. Of all meat which may be eaten, that on which such water cometh shall be unclean: and all drink that may be drunk in every such vessel shall be unclean.
35. And every thing whereupon any part of their carcase falleth shall be unclean; whether it be oven, or ranges for pots, they shall be broken down: for they are unclean and shall be unclean unto you.
36. Nevertheless a fountain or pit, wherein there is plenty of water, shall be clean: but that which toucheth their carcase shall be unclean.
37. And if any part of their carcase fall upon any sowing seed which is to be sown, it shall be clean.
38. But if any water be put upon the seed, and any part of their carcase fall thereon, it shall be unclean unto you.
39. And if any beast, of which ye may eat, die; he that toucheth the carcase thereof shall be unclean until the even.
40. And he that eateth of the carcase of it shall wash his clothes, and be unclean until the even: he also that beareth the carcase of it shall wash his clothes, and be unclean until the even.
41. And every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth shall be an abomination; it shall not be eaten.
42. Whatsoever goeth upon the belly, and whatsoever goeth upon all four, or whatsoever hath more feet among all creeping things that creep upon the earth, them ye shall not eat; for they are an abomination.
43. Ye shall not make yourselves abominable with any creeping thing that creepeth, neither shall ye make yourselves unclean with them, that ye should be defiled thereby.
44. For I am the Lord your God: ye shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and ye shall be holy; for I am holy: neither shall ye defile yourselves with any manner of creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.
45. For I am the Lord that bringeth you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: ye shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.
46. This is the law of the beasts, and of the fowl, and of every living creature that moveth in the waters, and of every creature that creepeth upon the earth:
47. To make a difference between the unclean and the clean, and between the beast that may be eaten and the beast that may not be eaten.

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