
BOOKS THAT COOK

The Making of a Literary Meal

Edited by

JENNIFER COGNARD-BLACK

and

MELISSA A. GOLDTHWAITE

With a Foreword by

MARION NESTLE

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FOREWORD

Sparking an avalanche of interest in writings about food is the simple fact that everyone eats. Years ago as a young biology teacher, I quickly discovered that students are willing to study anything if it relates to food. I could use food as an entry point to teach the principles of digestive physiology, the biochemistry of metabolism, and how nutrients function in health. And I could also use food to teach how governments regulate, the principles and practices of democratic societies, and anything else I wanted to about history, sociology, anthropology, or just about any other disciplinary area of study. Food, as my NYU department likes to explain, is a lens through which to view and analyze the most important political, economic, and cultural problems facing today's globalized world. And students, we professors soon find out, eat it up.

In 1996, a far-sighted dean at New York University took a leap of faith and allowed my department (known, amazingly, as Home Economics until 1990) to begin offering undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs in Food Studies. Only one other such program existed at the time, the Julia Child-inspired Gastronomy program at Boston University. Rather than Gastronomy, we chose to name our program Food Studies in a deliberate effort to command the academic respectability afforded to other NYU "studies" programs—Women's Studies, Liberal Studies, Media Studies, French Studies, and Africana Studies, for example.

A set of programs in hotel management had just been transferred from the department to another school at NYU, leaving a large tuition gap. I had been traveling for some years with a group of food writers, chefs, and academics and could feel their hunger—a frequent and appropriate metaphor in *Books That Cook*—for credible, research-based information about the history of food and about food itself. Academics and their graduate students yearned for more rigorous training in the analysis and interpretation of the role of food in society, approached from their various disciplinary perspectives. With the help of an outside advisory committee

(always a useful idea at academic institutions), I was able to convince the dean to let us try to make Food Studies work.

It worked, so much so that the food revolution has caught up with Food Studies. Food Studies is as much a part of today's food movement as are the organic, locavore, and small farm movements. Collectively, these movements feel like an avalanche, with Food Studies scholars racing to stay far enough ahead to make sense of it. I cannot keep count of the number of universities housing one or another food program offered by almost any conceivable discipline, many of these programs attached to flourishing organic gardens. I certainly cannot count the books. Our special collections library at NYU now houses fifty-five thousand cookbooks and other writings about food, all acquired within a period of just eight years. And we are by no means alone in taking food texts seriously.

Literature departments have been among the last academic disciplines to figure this out, often viewing food as too common, too populist, too quotidian, and, perhaps, too feminine to be worthy of serious study. Food Studies scholars all too frequently hear their research interests questioned—"Why would you want to study that?"—or dismissed summarily as "It's just food." Never mind that food constitutes a business generating more than a trillion dollars a year in the United States alone. Never mind that the most important public health problems affecting humanity have to do with the consumption of too little or too much food. And never mind the intense emotional and symbolic attachment that people of any culture and nationality feel about the food they consume and incorporate directly into their bodies.

Books That Cook brings the food revolution into the study of English literature—brilliantly, deftly, and with no apologies. No apologies are needed. As editors Jennifer Cognard-Black and Melissa A. Goldthwaite explain, Food Studies necessarily encompasses literature. Basic food texts—cookbooks and recipes—are as much a form of literature as are fiction, nonfiction, memoirs, and poetry. And why not? They tell stories. They convey myths. They are replete with drama, symbolic meaning, and psychological insight. Furthermore, they offer plenty to talk about: culture, religion, ethics, personal identity, and anything else that it means to be human. That food generates profound literary memories is famously known from what ensued after Marcel Proust dipped his madeleine in tea.

Writers of all times have used food memories to spark traditional literary texts. Today, we view cookbooks and recipes as equally worthy of literary analysis. Even recipes? As the editors explain,

Like an instruction manual, the recipe is a how-to text, explaining the organization of a space (a kitchen), the acquisition of tools and materials (implements and ingredients), and the step-by-step process by which a reader (the cook) can synthesize these materials into a finished product (the dish). Yet the recipe is also intentionally collaborative. The text does not have full meaning until a reader puts the recipe in motion through cooking and then brings that food to a common table. . . . When a food is shared and eaten, the reader actually embodies the text.

In the selection from Alice B. Toklas's work in *Books That Cook*, she says—one hopes ironically—“As if a cookbook had anything to do with writing.” As *Books That Cook* demonstrates, cookbooks and other quotidian writings about food have *everything* to do with the deeper meanings of expressed language, so much so that readers can interpret these selections on any number of levels: as English texts ripe for close textual analysis, as deeply moving fiction or memoir, as a way to learn about life, as suggestions for what to cook for dinner, or just as a pleasant way to pass time. You can even parse these writings as grammar, beginning with the declensions of the verb *to pie* given in the instructive selection from the *Anarchist Cookbook*. Food writing, as Kate Moses makes clear in her piece about Sylvia Plath, fiercely connects the life of the body to the life of the mind.

The pieces in *Books That Cook*, arranged as they are in menu sequence, have much to tell us about how and why what we eat as children so strongly influences our lives and how what we eat as adults cuts to our deepest emotions. The editors have selected riveting pieces by classic and contemporary writers who reflect more than the usual range of ethnicities, nationalities, and perspectives and whose work illustrates unique themes as well as those common to all.

The selections here point out the literary qualities—the poetry—in the most mundane aspects of food production and consumption, as well as their greater meaning. Bread is not just bread, as Sharon Olds tells us; it is “the having, the tasting, the giving of life.” These writings collectively argue

for the human hunger and passion for narrative as well as sustenance. We yearn for stories about what we are eating. Witness Sara Roahen's memoir of her post-Katrina exile from New Orleans: "Food without a narrative just tasted like food. . . . I was lost."

The editors suggest that you sample these writings as you might sample the dishes from a buffet or smorgasbord, taking them in small bites every now and then. But I, for one, could not put this book down. Never having thought about food writing in quite this way before, I was inspired by *Books That Cook*. My own scholarship, built on declarative sentences about the effects of industrial food systems on human health and welfare is, at first blush, far afield from the prose and poetry in this collection. But when I said that "our overabundant food system gives most of us the opportunity to make a political statement every time we eat—and to make a difference," I would now add writing to the list of interventions that food advocates can make.

Books That Cook propels the food movement and in doing so makes a political as well as a literary statement. It makes a difference. Read it. Savor the writings. Delight in them. Think about them. And if they inspire you to do your own writing about food, so much the better.

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Marion Nestle

Paulette Goddard Professor of Nutrition,
Food Studies, and Public Health