

On Reading Cookbooks

by P. J. Mills

John Thorne, the renegade food writer, once said, “Food writing’s shameful secret is its intellectual poverty.” While this observation is true of the majority of cookbooks, it most certainly does not apply to those written by Mireille Johnston and M. F. K. Fisher. I first discovered the phenomenon of reading cookbooks for pleasure at a friend’s house as we contemplated what to make for dinner. I reached for her copy of Johnston’s *The Cuisine of the Rose* because I liked the title. As I perused the mouth-watering and tantalizing recipes, I was mesmerized by her descriptions of their origins and began reading them out loud. Much later I bought a copy of the book, and value it for its literary as well as its culinary accomplishment. *The Cuisine of the Rose*, published in 1982, was Johnston’s second book on French cooking. Her first was the highly praised *The Cuisine of the Sun*, published in 1976. These two books were written for experienced cooks, but even if you are a mere novice, you will be transported simply by reading her recipes for chicken-liver soufflé; white sausages stuffed with prunes and apples; lentils served with toast spread with pâté and bacon; a little cake made with pork, chestnuts, and spices; and the wine, egg, raisin, and spice soup meant to be served as dessert.

Although the literary cookbook seems to have gone out of fashion, at one time, in the not too distant past, it was a staple of cooks in the know. The genre was created in the 1940s with the artful essays about food written by M. F. K. Fisher. Not a scholar, like Johnston, but a food enthusiast, Fisher wrote cookbooks filled with wry humor about the meaning of food. A passionate and beautiful woman, Fisher was photographed by Man Ray and admired

by the likes of James Beard, Julia Child, and Alice Waters. Her homely subject matter, however, caused serious literary writers and critics to dismiss her for many years.

This did not in the least deter her from her mission to make food writing literary writing.

By the 1960s W. H. Auden was calling her “America’s greatest writer.” John Updike dubbed her the “poet of the appetites,” and Clifton Fadiman said, “She writes about food as others do about love, but rather better.” Fisher’s work has been steadily re-collected and re-released.

In 2004 *The Art of Eating*, an award winning compilation of five of her cookbooks, was reprinted in a 50th Anniversary Edition. The collection includes “Serve It Forth,”

“Consider the Oyster,” “How to Cook a Wolf,” “The Gastronomical Me,” and

“An Alphabet for Gourmets.”

As our economy continues to spiral downward while food prices rise, many of us are eating out less often. In this time of forced frugality there is solace to be found in Fisher’s work, for she emphasizes that “doing without” should never make the experience of eating anything less than a joyful sharing with family and friends. A home-cooked meal made with simple ingredients can live in memory if the taste is good and the company congenial.

Writing during World War II, Fisher had an inspired ingenuity for making scrumptious meals in times of privation. And her fervent embrace of the pleasures of the table was matched by a cool acceptance of reduced circumstances.

Especially relevant today is “How to Cook a Wolf.” The wolf in question is figurative, the one that comes sniffing at the door in hard times. Fisher wrote the book in 1942 when food-rationing programs were introduced in the United States. “How to Cook a Wolf” has been delightfully described as “part cookbook, part essay, that reads like an issue of Lady’s Home Journal, if the editorial staff were taken over by a philosopher with an empty

stomach, a slightly tipsy poet, and a mischievous, foxy grandmother who once kept many lovers.” Here is Fisher’s introduction to a recipe for a soup meant to keep the wolf at bay: “... probably the most satisfying soup in the world for people who are hungry, as well as those who are tired or worried or cross or in debt or in a moderate amount of pain or in love ... or in any kind of business huggermuggery, is minestrone ... it is a thick unsophisticated soup, heart-warming and soul-satisfying, full of aromatic vegetables and well bound in the last with good cheese.”

What I like best about the literary cookbooks of Fisher and Johnston is that you don’t necessarily have to make their recipes, even though they are delicious, because reading them is satisfaction enough. *Bon Appétit!*

The Art of Eating, 50th Anniversary Edition

By M. F. K. Fisher

784 pages. Wiley Publishing. 2004

The Cuisine of the Rose: Classical French Cooking from Burgundy and Lyonnais

By Mireille Johnston

313 pages. Random House. 1982

The Cuisine of the Sun: Classical French Cooking from Nice and Provence

By Mireille Johnston

311 pages. Simon and Schuster. 1976

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