



Early Food Porn

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EARLY FOOD PORN, ARRIVING IN A brown paper wrapper with my name and address at the bottom. I slid the latest *Gourmet* magazine from the wrapper, opened and turned it upside down, allowing advertising postcards to fall into the post office mailbox trash. A quick scan through it, I rushed. Opening other mail, usually business related, now I had an idea of which articles I'd read first.

These were not coffee shop reads or ones to inhale in company.

I wanted to be alone with *Gourmet*, just me and the columns, sneaking away from everyone and my responsibilities, cowering under a down comforter, firm pillows behind my back, a glass of sturdy red to my left, and reading light on the right. Then I was ready, set to travel with Paul Theroux on the California Zephyr through Colorado, contemplate replicating Elizabeth David's Tomatoes a la Crème, or dream about dining at Thomas Keller's then-new restaurant The French Laundry.

You can purchase *Gourmet* covers as posters, framed prints, and more. Take a look!

Sometimes I challenged myself, trying out a recipe *Gourmet* shared from a highly rated restaurant. While some were complex, I never failed with them, instead trusting and believing in them more than any other food magazine. I wanted to live Jane and Michael Stern's lives touring the country, discovering the best out-of-the-way, casual dining experiences. Ruth Harkness and M. F. K

Fisher enjoyed a writing and dining life I envied.

Macrobiotic diet, ground broccoli stems, perhaps healthy, but dull, beige food at a Bahamas Paradise Island yoga retreat warped my taste buds. I sneaked out, caught a ride on a runabout boat, crossed back to Nassau, dined at Graycliff 's five-star restaurant, watching a Texas table of six flip their plates to learn where they had been manufactured. Housed in a 1740 mansion, the setting was the opposite of the yoga retreat's fare. Entertainment was provided by the other diners while I savored the last drop of conch soup, the restaurant's specialty. Sublime was my conclusion. Of course, *Gourmet* had been my guide, telling me how superb the restaurant. Accurate they were.

Back home in Portland, I veered from *Gourmet*'s recipes, baking eggplant using another food magazine's guidance, only to serve what has become known among friends as dried dinner disks. Next, my Thanksgiving dinner guests tolerated Peking Turkey, a recipe from another source. That was enough. I never left *Gourmet* again.

Each month the brown wrappers continued to arrive.

A cross country lover visited, an ideal time to make caponata. Love making ceased while I added more olive oil to the eggplant. That's what the recipe said to do—not about the lovemaking, of course, but likely the recipe author would have understood and condoned.

A prune croustade, truly one of my few culinary accomplishments, started with a *Gourmet* read.

A couple of decades passed. Julia Child, Marcella Hazen, James Beard, and a host of other culinary kings and queens consumed print real estate on my cookbook shelves.

Perla Meyers encouraged me to wear boots, look tall and thin as she did on her cookbook cover, carrying home fresh vegetables. Anthony Bourdain's show introduced me to his staff's Mexican grandmothers, cooking in small country villages. Lesser known names guided me to cook and serve Japanese and Indian treats. Fine, but only if *Gourmet* would give its approval, I thought.

Laurie Colvin, a novelist, but ultimate food writer and observer, neared being an idol, I determined as I consumed her column. The Sterns continued traveling the country, telling us of the best back-of-the-barn barbeque place in Nebraska, the only crab shack worth visiting in Maryland. I couldn't get enough.

And then it was no more. Closed. The end. No more to be.

I MISS *GOURMET*.

No shortage of recipes exists these days. Nor is there a cookbook shortage. In fact, the opposite has occurred with everyone and his or her best buddy writing books, doing food podcasts or television series. But I didn't read *Gourmet* to find a recipe for this evening's dinner. I read *Gourmet* because it transported me to another life. It took me around the world, to new cuisines, to meet folk I'd never heard of, fixing and eating foods I could hardly imagine. It took me to a life I didn't live every day.

Snooty, some said. And what's the problem with that, I ask. What, really, does that mean? Maybe it wouldn't hurt most of us to find a new way of thinking about whatever?

Ruth Reichl, *Gourmet*'s last editor told us about the magazine's final days. I read her book, pretending it was fiction. I didn't want to accept the truth of *Gourmet*'s doors closing. I still long for my early days of food porn. ❖