



The Art of Food Writing

Naomi Beth Wakan

EVERY YEAR, THE FRIENDS OF THE Library on our small island have a book sale to raise funds for bringing in authors of interest to enhance our already well-cultured island. I am so ambivalent about these annual sales because I am trying desperately to downsize my library, and yet I yearn constantly to expand it. On the day of the sale, I find myself almost at the head of the line-up, as if I had a panting need for additional books.

Inside, I remind myself of our budget and try for restraint. I glance casually at all the tables and am just about to depart, not having chosen a single title, when my eyes descend on a set of books in a nice little case. Can it be? Yes, it is. It's a set of Elizabeth David's writings on French and Mediterranean food and includes her revolutionary books *A Book of Mediterranean Food* (1950) and *French Country Cooking* (1951).

Like Proust's madeleines that catapulted him back to his childhood, this set of books sent me spinning back to the post-war period in England when food was still rationed. Can you imagine what effect David's books describing French and Mediterranean foods had on a vulnerable, non-domesticated teenager who had lived on her mother's wartime cooking that involved dried eggs and dried milk? Courgettes? Aubergines? Paella? Moussaka? Ratatouille? Hummus? Gazpacho? What on

earth were they? The sensuality of being lost in the world of, for me, exotic restaurants and recipes, mixed in with all the sensual films coming in from the continent after the war years was almost too much for a slightly inhibited—yet searching—teenager.

As her biographer, Artemis Cooper, said, "David was the best writer on food and drink this country has ever produced. When she began writing in the 1950s, the British scarcely noticed what was on their plates, which was perhaps just as well. Her books and articles persuaded her readers that food was one of life's great pleasures, and that cooking should not be a drudgery but an exciting and creative act. In doing so she inspired a whole generation not only to cook, but to think about food in an entirely different way."

In her own life, David was both frugal and sensible about what constitutes a good meal: "The most elementary hors d'oeuvre such as a plate of red radishes with a few of their green leaves, a dish of green and black olives, and another of halved hard-boiled eggs (not overcooked), with butter and bread on the table is ten times more tempting than the same ingredients got up in a pattern all on one dish and garnished with strips of this and dabs of that. You are, after all, preparing a meal, not decorating the village hall."

Elsewhere, she expands this idea: “There are times when one positively craves for something totally unsensational; the meals in which every dish is an attempted or even a successful tour de force are always a bit of a trial.” And here’s a further example of her not promoting the excessive: “I do not myself think it necessary to keep a large stock of liqueurs for flavoring fruit compotes and salads, or to bring them blazing to the table at every meal. Indeed the habit of flambéing everything from prawns to figs has become so prevalent that one can now scarcely dine out in London without for a considerable part of the meal being hemmed in by sheets of flame.” As Raymond Mortimer, the British writer, said, “The food is too rich and so are the customers.”

Elizabeth David, when asked whether it was awful to always be criticizing food and never enjoying it, replied, “Well, if a food writer does not exercise his or her critical faculties to a high degree and with a backing of informed experience, he or she is not doing his or her job.” She added that she also wrote of the benefits and pleasures of good food, good wine, and good cookery books. She was so decisively and delightfully opinionated: “A bad meal is always expensive.” When it comes to food writers, she is still considered one of England’s greatest.

They say you have to be knowledgeable about food in order to be a good food writer, but I am not. However, never daunted by a subject I know little about, when I start to write about a new interest, I do some research and then add my naiveté, which often hits on a freshness that may not have occurred to jaded authorities. Lack of knowledge has never inhibited my essay writing. Writing is always a learning process for me. As for food

writing, since I no longer travel further than Vancouver and rarely eat out, my food writing has to come from the disasters and triumphs in my own kitchen.

Still, you may wonder what qualifications I might have that would enable me to give advice to budding food writers. It’s true that I have little solid experience myself, apart from sixty-six years of cooking for two husbands and two children. My initial cake baking for my first husband was a cake that sat in the solidity of a pudding. However, years later and many meals under my belt, or rather eaten by myself and others, I can count two efforts on my part to support my being allowed to offer some suggestions about food writing and the production of cookbooks. First, I wrote a book about a year on my island, in which I offered a seasonal recipe for each month. The second effort that qualifies me to at least lay some thoughts down on paper about food writing is a cookbook I have prepared for my husband, Eli, so that his favorite recipes are there for him to make after I’m gone. This cookbook has been adjusted over the years of our marriage, from vegan to macrobiotic to vegetarian to slightly vegetarian (with the inclusion of fish and the occasional chicken or turkey) to now full-blown everything.

At eighty-eight, I have just rewritten Eli’s cookbook for the umpteenth time in order to reduce the number of recipes. After all, how many different hors d’oeuvre does one need to make at my age? I no longer have the energy to stuff mushrooms. Each recipe is one of Eli’s favorites, and each recipe has no more than six ingredients and takes no more than thirty minutes to prepare.

One of the recipes I provided in my book *A Gabriola Year* stemmed from my childhood.

I was brought up in an almost-assimilated Jewish family, but the one item of ethnic cooking that I still make that is a remnant from my early years is matzo balls for chicken soup. My matzo balls float divinely, and I add a touch of nutmeg, which horrifies most of my more orthodox friends. The gribenes, chopped liver, tzimmes, kugels, and gefilte fish have all gone by the board, but the matzo balls stay firmly entrenched in my recipe book, even though I have to ferry over to Vancouver Island to find the matzo meal.

My daughter's partner, Fred Baker, had parents who ran the famous 2nd Avenue Deli in New York, and Fred insisted I use his mother's recipe for matzo balls because they never sank to the bottom of the soup bowl, a disgrace by any standards. It's the one I have adopted and, as Fred said, "It never fails." In case you too have a memory of matzo balls as one of your childhood comfort foods, here is Fred's Matzo Balls that Don't Sink:

For 8 to 10 balls—A full cup of matzo meal, 4 eggs, 1/4 cup of vegetable oil, 1/4 cup ice-cold water, 1/2 teaspoon of salt, dash of pepper. Thoroughly whip up the 4 eggs, salt, oil, water, and pepper in a bowl. Now, with the same vigorous whipping motion, slowly pour in the matzo meal, and once you have incorporated all of it, keep whipping it to try to fluff it up as much as possible (a minute at least), then cover it with plastic wrap and put it in the fridge for at least twenty minutes. Meanwhile, bring a half-filled, coverable, 4-quart pot of salted (1 tablespoon) water to a brisk simmer—bubbling but not boiling fiercely. Take the mixture

out of the fridge and place it next to the pot. Run cold water over your hands and have a bowl of cold water nearby to rinse your hands in between making each ball. Now, with wet hands, take a good dip of the mixture to make a ball about 1.75–2 inches in diameter and drop it into the bubbling water. The balls should rise to the surface almost immediately. (If they don't, Fred recommended scrapping the mixture and starting again.) Once the balls are at the surface and the boil is nice and slow, cover the pot, and ten minutes later when you uncover it, you'll find they have grown into beautiful, fluffy 3- to 3.5-inch masterpieces. Turn off the heat and let them float on top and cool for a few minutes. Remove them from the pot and add to the chicken soup that you have previously made. You can then reheat the water for the next batch.

Why should one bother to write about food at all? Well, apart from food being a necessity and therefore well worth writing about, I could do no better than quote a passage by the great food writer M. F. K. Fisher: "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."

Food writing isn't really different in many respects from other writing; if it's not good, it's not good. You have to find your voice. That is, the writing must read as though you have

something urgent and interesting to tell the reader. Your voice must be helpful. In the case of food writing, it should be as if you are accompanying the reader to the restaurant or staying with them while they try the recipe. For this, your writing should be clear and accurate. Food writing differs only in that it accentuates the senses—taste first, but also smell, sound (of biting into food, of water boiling), touch, and sight. Descriptions using the senses should be attractive but not overblown. From the senses one can move on to give the background of the recipe, the restaurant, the area from which the food comes, etc. Most of all, you need passion in food writing (or in any writing, come to that), passion to tell why you love the food, the restaurant, the market you are trying to describe.

What do I look for in good food writing? Cookbooks? Food news? Restaurant reviews? Recipes? Let me just consider cookbook writing, as that concerns me most, for even at my age I am still looking for fresh ways to set food on the table. One thing I want in a great cookbook is an introduction to each recipe, explaining its origins and why the dish is so scrumptious. I like chit-chat at the top of the recipe. I enjoy a few tales of the writer's mother's kitchen to set the scene, but if the writer wanders too far from the subject, I may not want to wander with them. I ask for detailed quantities and steps—how big a carrot? how hard should the water be bubbling? The writer should not assume everyone knows how to poach an egg. I like a clean layout of the recipe page with, if possible, a clear photograph of the dish placed exactly opposite the recipe, attractive enough to intrigue me and make me want to try the recipe. If there is no

photograph, the writing should be as graphic as possible, so I can visualize the dish. The recipes should be well tested. I hate to fail because of someone else's errors. I love Julia Child's wont to include what could go wrong at each stage of her recipes. I like recipes to be short and uncomplicated and to have familiar ingredients, for I live on an island that doesn't bring in too many exotic food items. I like variations, so if I don't have one ingredient in the cupboard, I can add another, even if the substitution results in a somewhat different dish. I like to know how many people the recipe will serve; cooking for two most of the while, I don't like to have to eat the same dish for more than two meals running, although often it's better at the second eating. I don't like cookbook writers showing off with a mention of truffles (often white truffles) and exotic wines. I don't eat and drink those items every day, and I suspect the average reader doesn't either. As a person who has budgeted tightly most of my life—and a teetotaler—I can't claim extensive knowledge of either white truffles or wine with the right date on the bottle and so am saved from swanking when I do write about food.

As I said, with age, I seem to want simple recipes, those not involving a load of preparation and the buying of exotic ingredients. And, of course, I prefer large type and measurements in cups and teaspoons; I don't have scales. While I like strong opinions in a cookbook writer, I don't like ranting, and I try to remind myself that these are just the writer's opinions, unless they are backed up by solid research.

I believe in re-parenting myself when I start a new project or enter a new stage in life. When I decided to become a full-time

poet, I chose Billy Collins as my father and Wisława Szymborska as my mother. For essay writing, I stayed with a single, but very special parent—Montaigne, the father of all essay writers, although, being needy and greedy, I added Phillip Lopate later to keep me au courant.

So who could I suggest as food-writing parents? I did a quick survey. Far and away the most recommended food writer was Irma Rombauer. Her *Joy of Cooking* was my own first bible so many years ago. Other top food and cookbook writers worth studying include Julia Child, Michael Field, Calvin Trillin, M. F. K. Fisher, James Beard, James Villas, Jeffrey Steingarten, Claudia Roden, Anthony Bourdain, Ruth Reichl, Ina Garten (The Barefoot Contessa), Michael Pollan, Richard Olney, Marcella Hazan, Craig Claiborne, and Fuchsia Dunlop. Well, that's far too many parents to choose from. Julia Child had enormous influence when, with Simone Beck and Louisette Bertholle, she wrote the 1961 classic, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. In fact, all Child's food writings are still very popular. Her books *The Way to Cook* and *Baking With Julia*, written with baking author extraordinaire, Dorie Greenspan, rank high. I can't resist commending the United Kingdom's favorite domestic goddess, Nigella Lawson, and the king of vegetable cookery, Yotam Ottolenghi.

In case you are thinking of becoming a professional food writer, please take food critic Phyllis Richman's quote seriously: "[good food writing] is not press trips to Tuscany, not free meals at restaurants, and not the adoration of famous chefs where you sit around saying 'yum, yum' to everything put in front of you."

As I've recently been giving a number of

memoir-writing workshops, I am toying with the idea of writing my memoirs in the form of food writing, starting with the cans of Cow and Gate milk that I was fed as a baby and going through the coconut pyramids that were my mother's best cookies, the typical English breakfasts and teas I was served at my residence during my university years, the scientific cooking of my first husband (a chemist and artist), the chocolate ice cream of my second husband, and so on. In my book of memoirs, *Some Sort of Life*, I almost totally ignored my writing life. I corrected this by devoting an entire book to my life as a poet, *Poetry that Heals*. As cooking and fabric art have also been a big part of my life, devoting memoir books to each of these seems very appealing. Food writers have often used the memoir form for their writing, and I can't recommend enough Ruth Reichl's *Tender at the Bone* and *Comfort Me with Apples*, and M. F. K. Fisher's *The Gastronomical Me*. By the way, if you want a brilliant bit of food writing on the intrigues of the food business, you can hardly beat Nora Ephron's *The Food Establishment*. I love her take on greens: "This was right around the time endive was discovered, which was followed by arugula, which was followed by radicchio, which was followed by frisée, which was followed by the three M's—mesclun, mâche and microgreens—and that, in a nutshell, is the history of the last forty years from the point of view of lettuce."

These days, the web is overloaded with food bloggers, and I know there are far too many cookbooks out there in the world. Yet, even at my age, I'm still looking for that winning piece of food writing, that recipe I just have to try, so I continue to search. ❖